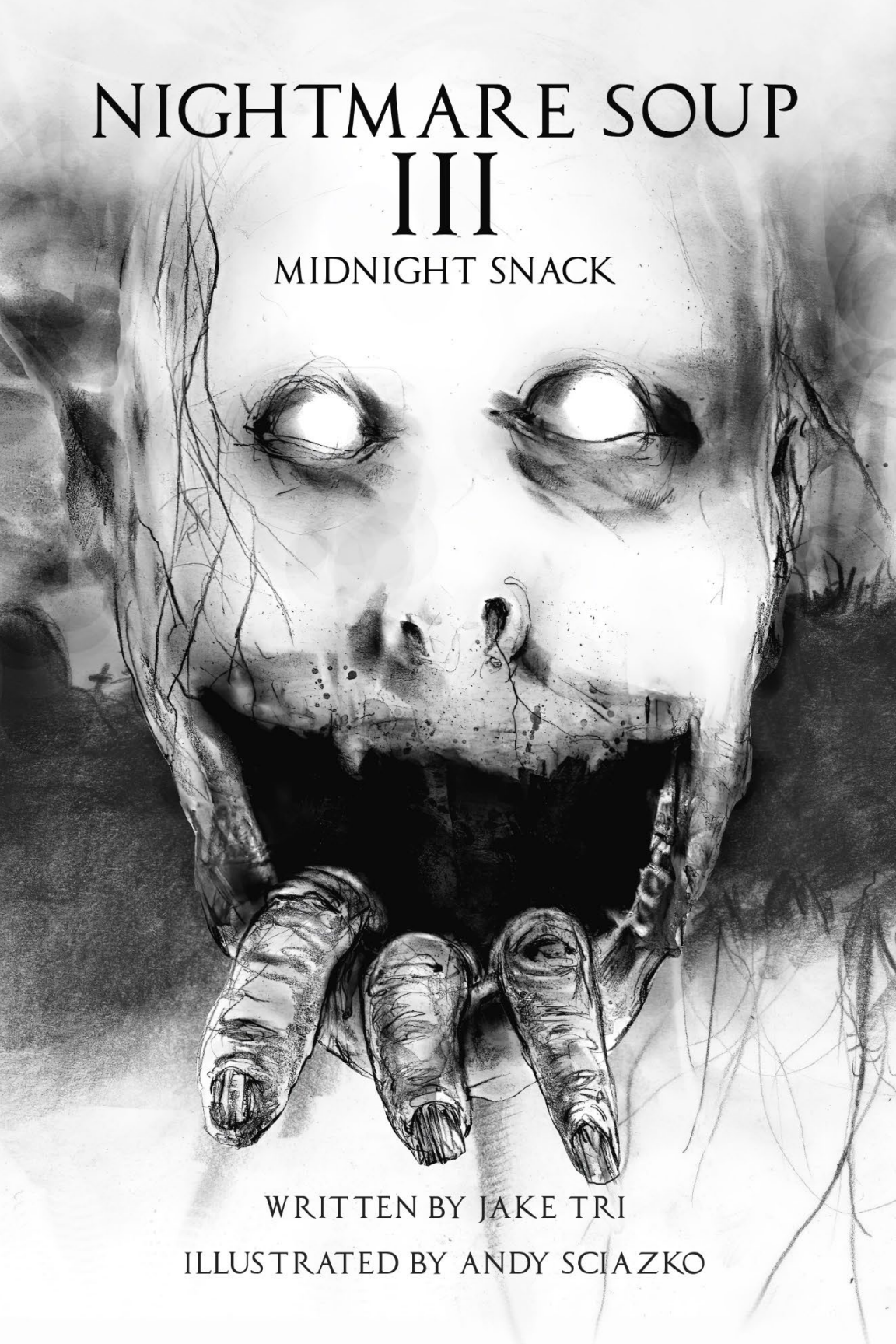


NIGHTMARE SOUP III

MIDNIGHT SNACK



WRITTEN BY JAKE TRI

ILLUSTRATED BY ANDY SCIAZKO

NIGHTMARE SOUP

III

MIDNIGHT SNACK

Written by Jake Tri
Illustrated by Andy Sciazko

Nightmare Soup 3: Midnight Snack

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NIGHTMARE SOUP III

MIDNIGHT SNACK



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NIGHTMARE SOUP

III

MIDNIGHT SNACK



THE HUNGER

“I’m so hungry, my stomach is practically screaming.”

Johnny clutched his abdomen as he browsed the diner menu, his mouth salivating at the pictures of juicy cheeseburgers, chicken sandwiches, and chili cheese dogs. His friend Carl sat across from him in the booth, also deciding on what to eat.

“I hear ya, man, I could eat everything on the menu.”

After a few minutes, Glenda the waitress came over with a couple glasses of water. “You boys figure out what you want?”

Johnny quickly spoke up. “I’ll have the double bacon cheeseburger with fries, a chili cheese dog, and a Coke... Oh, and the chicken wings.”

“Well, someone is certainly hungry.” Glenda laughed. “And what can I get you, hon?”

“I’ll have the bacon cheeseburger, fries, and a Coke as well,” Carl added.

“Okay, boys, we’ll have that right out to ya.”

As Glenda walked away, Johnny’s stomach started growling so loud Carl almost thought a small animal had snuck under the table.

“Jeez, man, I can hear that from over here.”

Johnny held his stomach as it continued to gurgle and whine. “Dude, I’m not kidding, I don’t think I’ve ever been this hungry.”

It wasn’t much longer until Glenda came out with the food. Johnny was so impatient he nearly snatched it out of her hands.

“Whoa now, hon, don’t bite my hand off.”

Johnny immediately stuffed the double cheeseburger into his mouth, grease dripping down his chin.

He apologized with his mouth still full of food. “I’m sorry, Glenda, I haven’t eaten all day.” He took another bite, and another. Carl and Glenda just watched in awe.

“Dude, slow down. You’re gonna choke or something,” Carl insisted, but Johnny just kept going.

He finished every bite of his food—the cheeseburger, the fries, the chili dog, and the wings—in just a couple minutes. Finally satisfied, he sat back in the booth and slowly sipped on his soda. A smile cut across his greasy, ketchup-stained lips.

Carl and Glenda were still watching. Carl hadn’t even taken a bite yet.

“I’m tellin’ ya, in my twenty years of servin’ folks food, I have never seen something like that. Thanks for the show kid.” She walked off, laughing to herself and shaking her head.

“Seriously, are you okay? I’ve never seen someone eat like that except for those competitive eating guys on TV.”

Johnny just smiled again and rubbed his now bulging, full stomach. “Yeah, Carl, I’m fine. I was just really, *really* hungry.”

When Johnny got home later that night, he continued to eat everything he could get his hands on. Chips, frozen pizzas, cupcakes; he nearly cleaned out the refrigerator. He only stopped eating because he fell asleep on the couch, with a pizza slice lying on his chest.

Johnny’s mom woke him up the next morning. “Get up, Johnny, it’s 7:30. You’re gonna be late for school.”

Johnny wiped his eyes and sat up. Immediately, his stomach started to grumble again. As he walked to his room to change his clothes, his mom stopped him.

“Johnny, have you been losing weight?”

Confused, Johnny looked down at himself. “Umm, not really. Why?”

“Hmm, those clothes just look big on you. Maybe I’m just seeing things. Anyway, I gotta head to work. Have a good day, son.”

Johnny entered the bathroom and looked at himself in the mirror... He did look a bit skinnier.

He stepped on the small metallic scale next to the toilet and audibly gasped.

“How in the world did I lose ten pounds?”

Suddenly a sharp pain ripped through his abdomen, causing Johnny to double over. His stomach grumbled so loud he could feel the vibration in his throat.

“What is wrong with me?” he mumbled to himself. “And how am I still so hungry?”

Johnny immediately went to the kitchen and gobbled down a large chocolate muffin. He instantly felt better.

On the way to school, Johnny’s stomach started rumbling again, causing him to stop at a fast-food joint and order five breakfast sandwiches. He finished all of them within the fifteen-minute drive.

And when he got to class, he had to leave twice to go to the vending machines, because his grumbling stomach made everyone stare at him.

Carl eventually caught up with him during a passing period.

“Hey, man, are you okay? Jenny said she could hear your stomach from the other side of the room in first period.”

Johnny opened a bag of chips and began munching on them.

“Something’s wrong, man. I can’t stop eating. Seriously I’m hungry 24/7. And if I stop my stomach starts to hurt. Even weirder, I lost ten pounds...overnight.”

“What?” Carl stepped back and took a good look at his friend. “Dude, you do look skinnier. You gotta go to the doctor. That’s not right.”

Johnny sighed. “Ugh, I hate the doctor. I absolutely hate it. I’ll give it one more day to see if it calms down. Maybe I’m just going through a growth spurt or something.”

“At age 17?”

Johnny munched on another handful of chips as he walked towards his next class.

“Stranger things have happened.”

...

Johnny continued eating nearly every hour that he was awake. If he stopped, the pain in his stomach would become nearly unbearable. And instead of going to the doctor right away, he just kept trying to ignore it, hoping that the hunger would simply go away. But it wasn’t the constant eating that started to truly worry him, it was the drastic weight loss.

After just one week, Johnny had lost nearly fifty pounds.

...

“Dr. Jenson will see you now.”

Johnny stood up, his mom by his side, and followed the nurse into an exam room.

After a few minutes, Dr. Jenson walked in and greeted them.

“Okay, Johnny, so what’s going on? Based on your chart you dropped some pretty significant weight since last time you were here.”

“I have to eat almost every hour, and if I don’t my stomach grumbles extremely loudly, and I get these sharp pains in my abdomen. But the strangest thing is that I’ve dropped almost fifty pounds...in just under seven days.”

Dr. Jenson furrowed his brow. “That can’t be...”

Johnny stood up. His baggy clothes hung off his frame like a wet towel drying on a clothesline.

“I promise you.”

Dr. Jenson immediately had Johnny lie back as he palpated and listened to his stomach with a stethoscope. A roaring groan and gurgle erupted from Johnny’s abdomen. Dr. Jenson nearly fell off his exam stool. His face was a picture of shock.

“Not to alarm you, but I think we need to get you to the emergency room.”

A couple hours later, Johnny was sitting in another exam room listening to a specialist explain that they were going to put him to sleep and look through his intestines using a specialized scope. This would show them what was going on inside his stomach.

Johnny could only lie there and wait for the anesthesia to take effect. He could feel his stomach churning and pulsating. The hunger was stronger than ever. And the last thing he thought of before everything went black, was a thick, greasy, double bacon-cheeseburger.

...

The calm void of darkness soon gave way to an annoyingly bright light as Johnny slowly awoke from the procedure. He felt groggy and confused, especially as the first image in front of him was a group of noticeably concerned faces.

“Is everything okay? Did they find what was wrong with me?” he murmured.

The doctor that performed the procedure sat down by Johnny’s side and took a deep breath.

“Son, you’re not going to like hearing this, but I’ll just come right out and say it... You have a twin growing inside you... I’ve only read about this in medical journals as it’s *incredibly* rare, but you likely absorbed it in the womb, and it’s been slowly growing for the past 17 years. It’s just now large enough to notice and has co-opted your digestive system. It’s basically a giant parasite, eating everything you eat and absorbing the nutrients like a massive tapeworm. It even has teeth and hair. Every time you have a meal, you’ve been eating for two, but the twin is consuming too much of your body’s resources, which is why you’ve been drastically losing weight. We’re going to have to operate immediately before it grows any larger.”

Johnny immediately ripped the medical gown from his torso and looked down at his bloated stomach. It gurgled and churned like never before, and that’s when he finally felt it. A writhing mass of teeth, hair, and twisted organic tissue pulsing inside his body. The twin hadn’t been fed in several hours, and it was *extremely* hungry.

Author’s note: “Fetus in fetu” is a rare developmental abnormality in which a mass of tissue resembling a fetus forms inside the body of its twin. Only seven cases have been found in people age 15 or older.

THE MOTEL

The following is based on a true story...

“Please get out of the city and head to the West Coast... please. It will just make me feel better.”

Jake paced back and forth across his small apartment living room, holding his phone to his ear.

“Fine, Mom, fine. I’ll do it, but it’s a waste of time. There is no way the hurricane will do much damage this far inland. I’m in the middle of the state.”

Jake took a deep breath and sighed as he plopped a small travel bag onto his bed.

“I’ll be lucky to find a place to stay. The entire east coast of Florida has the exact same idea.”

“I’ll be worried all night if you don’t go. Just do it for your mom.”

Jake grabbed whatever clean clothes were around him, plus a few bathroom items, and haphazardly tossed them into his bag. “Okay, Mom, I’m leaving now, just for you. I’ll call you when I get there. I love you.”

Jake hung up the phone and took another long, deep breath. He pulled up a hotel booking app on his phone, but it didn’t take long for him to realize every hotel and motel on the West Coast, from Panama City all the way down to Naples, was completely filled.

“I knew it,” he muttered angrily to himself. He grabbed his bag and headed down to his car.

...

After nearly two hours of driving, Jake stopped at a gas station and opened the hotel app. Still, nothing was available. The wind and rain had picked up significantly as palm trees near the parking lot started to sway somewhat violently. If the weather was this bad all the way over here, how bad was it getting back east? Maybe his mom was right to convince him to leave. Still though, he didn't have any place to stay, and didn't know anyone in the area he could call.

His only option was to sit in his car, constantly refresh the hotel app, and hope something became available, all while heavy sheets of rain slammed into his windshield.

...

After another hour passed and the weather continued to deteriorate, Jake tried the app one more time. A single, solitary motel popped up in the results. One vacancy available.

The motel was in a middle of nowhere town about twenty miles from the western coast, almost near the Everglades. The pictures didn't exactly look inviting, and it had a 2-star rating out of 5, but at this point, all Jake needed was shelter.

It was either that or find some concrete parking garage to stay the night in, and at least the motel would have a bed and television.

It took Jake another half hour to reach the motel. At this point it was already deep into the night, and the wind and rain were whipping across his car, howling and hissing like some kind of rabid animal.

Jake stopped his car amid broken branches and palm tree leaves that already littered the area around the parking lot. He grabbed his bag and rushed into the small check-in area. Even just

a few seconds in the downpour were enough to soak him to the bone.

The old woman at the front desk was emotionless and cold.

“Checking in?” she asked.

Jake wiped the cold rain from his face. “Yeah, it’s under Jake Thomas.”

The woman took his credit card, swiped it, and gave it back to him with no emotion whatsoever.

“There’s a \$150 deposit for the room. You’re lucky, it was our last one due to a cancellation. It’s on the second floor, all the way to the left. Room 217.”

“Thanks.”

Jake grabbed the room key and trudged back out into the rain. Everything about this motel shouted ‘grimy, unclean, unmaintained’, but what choice did he have?

He walked to the far end of the building. The lights meant to illuminate the outside of each door were broken. Only one worked, but it dimly flickered like a candle about to be extinguished.

As Jake walked up to 217, he looked out into the palm trees surrounding the motel. They swayed eerily back and forth, scraping against the side of the building like a swamp creature dragging its claws against the concrete.

‘Bad vibes’ would be an understatement.

Jake opened the door and was immediately hit with a musty, stale smell, like water from outside had been leaking through the roof onto the carpet. He reached for the light switch and flipped it up.

Nothing. Just a dark, foreboding void staring back at him.

“This night just keeps getting better,” he muttered to himself.

He threw his bag on the bed and reached out to a small lamp sitting on a cheap nightstand. Finally, some light. It was just

enough to make his way around the room without bumping into anything.

At this point, Jake was exhausted. All he wanted to do was watch some TV and drift off to sleep. He was leaving this trash-box motel first thing in the morning.

He changed into some dry clothes and plopped down onto the bed, then grabbed the remote and pointed it at the old, tube style television that looked to be about twenty-five years old. He pressed the power button, which of course didn't work.

Jake sighed and sat up, trudged over to the TV, checked to make sure it was plugged in and hit the power button. Still nothing.

"You've got to be kidding me."

With barely any cell reception and no Wi-Fi, scrolling through his phone wasn't much of an option either, so he turned off the lamp and crawled into the rough, wrinkled blankets of the small twin bed. It wasn't comfortable at all, but Jake tried his best to just close his eyes and hope he could get some much-needed rest.

About a half-hour later, Jake's eyes suddenly ripped open. Not only were the wind and rain raging outside, but he felt a *crawling* sensation on his stomach. Then seconds later, something skittered across his right arm.

Jake violently threw the covers off the bed and reached over for the lamp. As soon as he turned on the light and looked at his body, his stomach twisted into a hard knot and a scream erupted from his throat.

Bed bugs... Bed bugs *everywhere*. Hundreds of them embedded into his flesh, from his legs to his upper chest, feasting on his blood.



He rushed to the bathroom in a panic, slammed the handle of the shower to the 'on' position, and jumped into the icy cold water, not caring what temperature it was.

He smashed, ripped, and clawed every bug from his body. He washed his hair five times, scrubbing and scraping his scalp until it was red and raw. He spent over forty minutes in the shower just making sure he had rid himself completely of the nasty little parasites.

When Jake got out of the shower, he still felt sick to his stomach. He walked back to the bed and peeled away the sheets, revealing more bed bugs awaiting his return. But as soon as they were discovered and the faint glow of the lamp was upon them, they silently scattered to any crevice they could find.

The storm outside seemed to be at its strongest point. Jake could hear the thrashing palm trees slamming into the building. Leaving the room wasn't an option; Jake was stuck inside with the nasty little insects that lusted for his blood.

He decided the best place to stay would be the bathroom. He'd simply dry the tub off and then put a pillow in there and lie down to try and get a few hours of rest.

Yet again he found himself in an extremely uncomfortable position, but it was better than the infestation that likely occupied every corner of the bedroom area.

Jake didn't get any sleep at all that night. As soon as the sun came up and the storm had finally calmed down, he grabbed his things and angrily marched down to the office.

He ripped open the door to the surprise of the old woman, who had just arrived back at the check-in desk.

Jake smashed the room key onto the counter.

"Bed bugs! Bed bugs EVERYWHERE!"

He slammed the door on his way out and walked to his car, stepping over storm debris that covered the entire area.

As Jake pulled out of the parking lot, the wind was still howling through the air. He took a deep breath, a sigh of relief to be done with such a disgusting, horrible night.

But at that very moment, Jake felt a very distinct crawling sensation creeping across his scalp.

BEST FRIENDS

“The water is almost gone. Here, I want you to have the last sip.” Hank handed Jerry the nearly empty container, his hands shaking with weakness and dehydration. “I thought it would last us a lot longer.”

Hank and Jerry had been stranded on the ocean for over seven days...

They had been traveling in a small single-engine airplane from California to Mexico, headed to a popular fishing destination just across the border. It was supposed to be a week of adventure and fun shared by two best friends, but it quickly turned into a nightmare when the engine unexpectedly failed, and they were forced to crash into the water several miles from the coast.

Hank was piloting and able to get a mayday message out, but they weren't sure if anyone had received it. Luckily, both men survived the actual collision and emerged relatively unharmed. Jerry even had the emergency life raft inflated and ready to go, complete with a first aid kit and a small supply box.

They never imagined they'd be in such a situation, as it was something that only occurred in the movies. Something that only happened to *other* people. Yet here they were, still floating on the vast ocean waters, desperately thirsty, painfully hungry, and quickly running out of time.

The two men were sprawled out on opposite ends of the life raft, the blazing hot sun beating down on their red, blistered bodies. They tried to create a small area of shade, but it was only temporary, and barely provided any relief. Their prayers for rain also went unanswered. They couldn't even take a quick dip in the water to cool off, as sharks had been circling them for days.



Hank seemed to be holding up a bit better than Jerry, who was deteriorating fast.

“I’m so hungry, Hank. It feels like my stomach is eating itself. I can barely take it.” Jerry held his stomach and curled up into a ball. Despite just taking a drink of water, his lips were white and crusty from dehydration.

Hank pulled the last chunk of a protein bar out of his pocket. “Here, you can have this too... It’s the last of everything that was in the supply box.”

The men had already tried rowing towards the direction they thought the shoreline was, but after hours upon hours of exertion, land was still nowhere in sight.

And while they had heard of people surviving far longer than a week in the ocean, they couldn’t see how they had much time left, given their lack of supplies, water, and the deadly heat pounding down on them from the radiating sun. Hank especially knew their situation was looking grim.

“Jerry...I’m about to say something that may sound weird, but I want you to know I’m dead serious about it.”

Jerry sat up, knowing his friend was about to make an important statement.

“If for some reason I don’t make it, I want you to make use of...what’s left.”

Jerry’s eyebrows bunched in confusion. “What are you taking about?”

Hank looked out into the vast ocean, knowing what he was about to say would be a shock. “If I...expire...before you, you can use what’s left of me to survive.”

“You mean you want me to eat you? Hank, you can’t start talking like this, there’s still a chance someone could find us.”

“I know, Jerry, I know... I’m just saying, worst case scenario. We won’t make it much longer without food and water.”

Jerry took a moment to let Hank’s words sink in. He lay back down and curled into a ball, feeling his stomach twisting in hunger. Hank was right.

“Okay, Hank, I understand. And just for the record, same thing goes for me. If I don’t make it, then do what you gotta do.”

Hank simply nodded and looked back out at the ocean.

...

Two more days passed, and both men had taken a dramatic turn for the worse. Their last ounce of hope, and their last flare, had been used on a passing cargo boat in the distance that never saw them. At this point both men seemed resigned to their fate.

Jerry leaned over the edge of the raft and looked at the ocean water gently swaying back and forth. It looked cool and inviting. And he was so thirsty, all he wanted was to wet his lips, just one little drink.

“Hank, I’m going to drink some ocean water. I can’t take it anymore; I just need one drink.

Hank could barely lift his head up. “Don’t do it, Jerry, the salt will just dehydrate you quicker. You’ll start to become delusional.”

Jerry looked out into the seemingly infinite abyss spread out around them. He thought he saw giant shadows swimming below... Maybe whales, maybe sea monsters. Everything had started to become a hazy blur.

“I think it’s too late for that, Hank.”

And with that Jerry leaned over the raft, cupped his hand, and splashed some ocean water into his mouth. The salt burned the

back of his tongue as it traveled down his throat, but it was cool and the wetness upon his lips provided some relief.

He drank another scoop, and another, until his belly was full of the soupy ocean mixture of water, sodium, and tiny floating organisms.

Jerry knew it was a horrible move, it likely signed his death warrant, but for the moment it was worth it.

“I just want you to know you were a great friend, Hank. Thanks for being there for me all those years.”

Hank could barely respond. “You too, Jerry, you too.”

After a couple hours had passed, Jerry started to feel the effects of drinking from the ocean. His stomach was tearing itself to pieces from the violent mix of hunger and toxic salt water. He looked out into the horizon and saw all sorts of dark blobs and shapes dancing far off in the distance.

“Ships! Hank, there are ships out there!”

But Hank knew better. “There’s nothing out there, Jerry. You’re hallucinating.”

Jerry tried to focus his eyes, but everything was a blur of blue and black. Tunnel vision had started to set in.

“Maybe you’re right, Hank, maybe you’re right.”

...

Three hours later, the sun started to set. Jerry’s mental condition continued to drastically deteriorate, and Hank was slowly drifting in and out of consciousness. He could hear Jerry whispering to himself.

“It’s time, Hank. I’m so hungry. I just want one last meal before I go. I think...I think you’ve gone to the other side, right? You’re dead now, right?”

Hank couldn't even respond. He just moaned faintly, trying to alert his friend that he was still alive.

"Thank you for doing this for me, Hank. Thank you. I'm just so hungry, my insides are tearing themselves apart! I just need to eat one last time."

As the sun dipped below the horizon line, Hank slowly turned his head to see Jerry sitting there with his knees curled to his chest, a jagged smile cutting across his face. He had completely lost it.

"You're going to taste so good, Hank. Like a juicy steak, I bet. It's finally time."

Jerry started crawling towards Hank on his hands and knees like some type of frail, emaciated creature. Jerry hovered over Hank's leg, where his calf muscle was, and started salivating.

"This looks like the best part. I'm going to try this first. Thank you again, Hank. You truly are my best friend."

Hank could do nothing as Jerry opened his jaw as wide as he could and slowly leaned in for the first bite.

...

Three days later a large fishing boat came upon the life raft. It was a horrific sight. Hank's corpse was half eaten, while Jerry's body sat propped up on the other side. His cold, dead eyes were still wide open, and there was a satisfied, blood-soaked smile etched into his face.

WHEN I GROW UP

Tricia sat in front of twenty third graders, all sitting in a half circle in the back of the classroom.

“Today we’re going to talk about what we want to be when we grow up. We’ll start on the left side of the room. Carter, you start us off. What do you want to be when you’re older?”

Carter smiled, eager to let everyone know. “I want to be a firefighter like my dad.”

“Very nice.” Tricia grinned. “What about you, Rebecca?”

“I want to be doctor.”

One by one, each child took turns naming their desired future profession. It was all the common answers you’d normally hear: policeman, astronaut, baseball player, nurse, and so on. Until she got to the last child.

“And finally, Sam, what do you want to be?”

Sam’s head had been lowered the entire time, his long dark hair covering most of his face. He was silent for several seconds, then raised his head and stared at Tricia with cold, emotionless eyes.

“Sam, what do you want to be when you grow up?” she asked again.

A devious, crooked smile emerged from his lips. “I want to be a monster.”

The rest of the children started laughing.

“Sam, we both know that’s not a real thing.” But Sam stuck to his answer.

“I want to be a monster... maybe I’ll eat some of you.”

Again the children laughed, but not Tricia. She had been teaching third grade for nearly four years now, and as much as she

hated to admit it, Sam was the first kid who genuinely creeped her out. He was incredibly anti-social, often started fights with the other kids, never wanted to participate in any activities and would sometimes sleep at his desk, muttering odd gibberish in a low, growling voice. Tricia thought there might be some issues going on at home, but his parents seemed like incredibly nice, normal people.

“What about a firefighter like Carter?” she prompted.

“No!” Sam screamed. The other kids immediately stopped laughing. “I said...I want to be a monster.”

Tricia decided she’d just let it go. There were only a couple more weeks left in the school year, and soon creepy little Sam would be someone else’s problem.

Later that day, the kids all sat quietly working on a class project. Tricia looked up from grading papers to check on everyone. Sam was just sitting there, glaring at her with the same devious smile carved into his face.

He silently mouthed the words, “I’m going to eat you up.”

“Sam, please get back to work.”

But Sam just laughed and put his head down on the desk to sleep.

A couple weeks went by, and it was the last day of school. The kids all cheered when the bell rang at the end of the day, which officially meant summer had started.

As the kids filed out of the classroom, Sam was the last one. Just before exiting the room, Sam turned around.

“Hey, Miss Stuart... I’ll always remember you.”

He flashed his creepy little smile and walked into the hallway.

In most circumstances, Tricia would have taken this as a compliment, but the cold, monotone way in which he spoke sent a shiver down her spine.

Once the classroom was completely empty, Tricia started gathering her things, and muttered under her breath, “Oh, I’ll remember you too, Sam. Hopefully I’ll never see you again.”

...

Tricia continued teaching at Eagleton Elementary for nearly two decades. She became one of the best educators in the district and was set to be named “State Teacher of the Year” for an unprecedented third time. To recognize her accomplishments, there was a featured article about her in the local newspaper, which she was eager to read once she arrived home from a long day at school.

She walked into an empty house around 7 p.m., not unusual as her kids were off at college, and her husband often worked late nights at a local law firm.

She turned on the TV and grabbed the mail lying on the kitchen table. There was a letter addressed to her maiden name “Miss Stuart”, which immediately struck her as odd.

The local news was on and before she opened the letter, a story popped up that caught her attention.

“Tonight, Channel 6 investigates yet another report of local pets going missing. One homeowner reported seeing a man with long black hair, in a black hoodie, taking her cat from the front porch. Authorities made a composite sketch based on her description. If you have any information on this individual, please contact the local authorities.”

Tricia stared at the sketch; it was oddly familiar looking.

She turned back to the letter. The handwriting on the envelope was rough and unrefined. She had seen this writing before. A cold chill ran down her spine.

“Sam...”

She slowly opened the envelope and pulled out a single folded piece of paper. Three small objects fell to the floor and rolled under the table. Tricia bent down to see what had fallen...

It was three human teeth.

Tricia let out a small scream. Her stomach twisted in knots. She opened the piece of paper to reveal a single line of writing.

"To my favorite teacher."

Tricia dropped the letter and called the police. Ten long minutes later they arrived.

Tricia recounted how she knew the man who had been abducting the pets, and that she had taught him as a child.

The police took down all the information and said they would do their absolute best to find him.

They also said they would have an officer parked outside her house for the next couple of days, just in case.

Once the officers left, Tricia was visibly shaken. She poured a glass of wine, her hands trembling as she brought it to her lips.

She then called her husband and asked that he please come home immediately.

She walked up the stairs to her bedroom, thinking a hot shower might calm her down. She threw her jacket on the bed and started looking for her bathrobe...

That's when she heard a scratching sound coming from underneath the bedframe.

Scratch, scratch, scratch.

The air in Tricia's lungs was sucked from her body. She turned to run downstairs, but a hand jutted out from beneath the bed and snagged her ankle, causing her to fall and violently smack her forehead on the hardwood floor.

She was nearly knocked out cold.



Her blurred vision caught a figure crawling out from under the bed, clawing into the floor like some type of monster.

It scurried on its hands and knees to her side and hovered over her face.

It was a man with thin, greasy black hair. Wide, bloodshot eyes, and a grizzly, nightmarish smile made of rough, makeshift dentures filled with pointed canine teeth... Teeth that had been taken from the local cats and dogs.

“Hello, Miss Stuart,” he growled. “I saw you in the paper.”

Tricia was barely conscious. “Sam...”

Sam leaned in closer to Tricia’s face, his breath was hot and foul smelling.

“I always told you I was going to be a monster...and now I’m going to eat you up.”

Tricia’s husband arrived home about fifteen minutes later. He called out to his wife but was met with silence.

He walked upstairs and into the bedroom. Tricia was gone, but there was something on the wall, written in fresh, dripping blood. It was a large letter and symbol...

“A+”

THE WINDOW

I'm afraid of windows, it's an odd phobia indeed,
But if you slept in my room, fear was guaranteed.
It came every night, near the 3 a.m. hour,
I tried not to look; underneath the covers I'd cower.

It stood at my window, with hollow, black eyes,
And scratched at the glass, as it listened for my cries.
It was always smiling, with a wide, jagged grin,
It had long skinny limbs, and pale white skin.

It had been coming for months, what it wanted was unknown,
Did it feed on my fear? Or want to feast on my bones?
I'd tell it to leave, but it would never comply,
It just stood outside, and glared with its eyes.

I was just a kid, so no one believed my tale,
And if I wasn't alone, it's appearance would fail.
It only wanted me, that was its single goal,
To eat my flesh, or take my soul.

I covered the window, with curtains and a sheet,
But the scratching got louder, and it howled and shrieked.
If I left my house, and I slept somewhere new,
I'd wake up to scratching, and in the window, guess who.

It evaded my traps, it seemed nothing could be done,
So I slept with a knife, and my trusty BB gun.
It wouldn't go away, and I was losing all hope,
But I had one more idea, a new plan to invoke.

I was sick of being scared, it was time to fight,
So I sat by the window and waited until night.
It showed up on time, at its normal place,
But I was there waiting, to stare right in its face.

Its smile grew wider, with its eyes of pitch black.
But I moved even closer, and I smiled right back.
An inch of glass, all that separated us two,
I stood up and I yelled, "I'm not afraid of you!"

It hissed and it snarled, but its smile was gone,
It stepped back from the window, its spirit withdrawn.
Fear is what it wanted, and I would no longer provide.
So it vanished in the fog, as its game had died.

It never came back, not the next day, or the next week.
I could finally relax, and I could finally sleep.
But one thing's for sure, something everyone should know,
When it's the middle of the night, don't look out the window.



SQUID SOUP

The following is based on a true story...

“Are you sure about this?”

Lisa looked down at the bowl in front of her. A fully intact squid sat atop a pile of noodles, broth, seaweed, and fish eggs.

“It’s fine, I promise.” Her friend Matt smiled. “People eat this all the time. It’s called a ‘Dancing Squid Bowl.’”

Lisa’s eyebrows scrunched in confusion. “Wait...what do you mean by ‘dancing?’”

Matt couldn’t stop himself from laughing. He simply grabbed the porcelain soy sauce container and drizzled the dark brown liquid across the squid’s legs. Immediately, they started writhing and squirming around the bowl as Lisa nearly jumped out of her chair.

“There’s no way I’m eating that! The squid is still alive!”

At this point Matt’s cackling could be heard across the whole restaurant.

“I’m sorry, I just had to see your reaction. That made my entire day.” Matt wiped the tears of laughter from his face and collected himself. “But, no, it’s definitely dead. The nerves in the tentacles are just reacting to the salt in the soy sauce, causing them to spasm. I know it seems gross, but it’s completely harmless.”

Lisa looked at the squirming sea creature in front of her, an expression of absolute horror etched into her face. “Well, I don’t care what it is, I’m not eating it.”

Matt wasn’t going to give up that easily. “Oh, come on, Lisa, you said you’d try new things on this trip. You knew the food was

going to be different. It's actually delicious, you just have to try it."

Lisa lowered her head to get a better look at the sea creature she was about to consume. She looked deep into its black eyes and an uneasy feeling crept across her skin.

"It almost looks...angry. I'm telling you, Matt, this thing is still alive."

Matt rolled his eyes. "Oh, my goodness, Lisa. Look, I'll take a bite myself to show you it's perfectly fine."

Matt grabbed a set of chopsticks and pinched the top of the squid, its legs still spasming as he lifted it towards his mouth.

"Bon appétit."

He bit down into the wriggling tentacle, as a clear juice squirted onto his lips.

"See, it's actually really goo—AAAAAGGGHHHH!"

The tentacles stopped squirming around and firmly latched onto Matt's face.

A sharp, needle-like pain surged through his tongue as the squid tried to fight its way out of his mouth.

Lisa looked on in horror, not knowing what to do as Matt stood up and screamed.

"Get it off! Get it off me!" The words were jumbled as his mouth was still full of squid tentacles.

Matt grabbed onto the squid and tried to pull it away, but it again clamped down onto his tongue, he could feel it digging in even further.

A surge of adrenaline allowed him to finally rip the sea creature off his face and throw it across the room.

"Are...are you okay?" Lisa's eyes were still wide with shock.



Matt spat out chunks of squid tentacle and held a napkin to his mouth and lips. “I don’t know, it feels like something is still digging into my tongue.”

One of the restaurant workers rushed over.

“I am so sorry! We have a new chef. I’m sure this was simply a mistake. It was not prepared correctly. Please, let us make this right.”

Matt wiped his face once more. “It’s...it’s okay. Mistakes happen.” He turned to his friend. “Come on, Lisa, I’m going to get this checked out, just to be safe.”

Twenty minutes later, Matt and Lisa arrived at a small walk-in clinic. Matt’s tongue was still buzzing with a sharp, prickling pain.

When the doctor came into the room, Matt explained the story. The doctor grabbed a small handheld light and told Matt to open his mouth.

Matt was watching the doctor’s eyes as he conducted the examination, and when he lifted his tongue to look at the underside, the doctor’s eyes suddenly widened in surprise.

Matt moved his head back. “What’s wrong?”

The doctor cleared his throat.

“Well...it seems the squid injected its eggs into your tongue. We’ll have to cut them out, one by one, before they hatch.”

BOOGERS

“Scotty! Stop picking your nose!” Scotty’s mom glared at him through the rear-view mirror. “You’re twelve years old, and it’s gross.”

Scotty sat in the back seat of the car and looked at a large, crusty booger stuck to his index finger.

“I know, Mom, I know... I’ll stop.”

But Scotty knew that was a lie. He loved picking his nose. It felt good to root around the inside of his nostrils, looking for chunks of hardened snot and dirt.

He loved to dislodge the dried pieces of mucus with his fingernail, then move them around in his nasal passages. He especially enjoyed when they were hard and jagged in shape. He’d pry them out and closely inspect their yellowish green color, and finally, he’d roll them between his fingers until they became a perfect little ball, which he’d then flick away to any random spot around him. Scotty knew it was a disgusting habit, but he simply couldn’t stop no matter how hard he tried.

One day, while sitting in his room, Scotty felt the urge to go picking. He’d been outside for several hours earlier and the air was especially dry. The perfect climate for big, crusty boogers.

He gleefully stuck his index finger in his nose and felt around. There was tons of jagged gold waiting to be excavated, which Scotty was happy to do.

After pulling out an exceptionally large, chunky snot block, Scotty started to roll it between his fingers. But then he suddenly stopped.

In all his years of nose picking, there was one line he had never crossed, one thing that even Scotty didn't have the stomach to do. He'd never eaten one of his boogers.

What did it taste like? He knew of other kids who had done it several times, so maybe it tasted good.

With that thought, Scotty made the decision, he was going to eat his first booger. He inspected the golden mass of dried dirt and mucus stuck to the end of his finger. It even had a little nose hair trapped inside it.

He took a deep breath...then popped the booger into his mouth. He rolled it around his tongue, and then started chewing it, letting it stick to his teeth like a grotesque gummy bear.

It was delicious.

From then on, Scotty always ate his boogers and continued doing so for years. Anytime he was alone, he'd joyfully dig inside his nostrils for his favorite crusty snack.

Then one summer, near his 16th birthday, Scotty had been out on the beach for a bit too long during a family vacation. His shoulders, face, and upper torso had been particularly sunburnt. But after a few days of aloe vera and skin moisturizer, Scotty's sunburn started to heal.

He looked over to his left shoulder and saw a sliver of dead skin forming near the end of his collar bone. He instantly smiled, as he was beginning to peel.

Besides picking his nose, one of Scotty's other favorite activities was pulling off dead skin, something he couldn't do very often as it only occurred after a bad sunburn. It was incredibly satisfying to strip away the thin, white sheets of dead cells and roll them between his fingers just like a booger.



But this time Scotty didn't flick them away like normal, he had something much more disgusting in mind. He popped them into his mouth and ate them. It was a delectable treat, even tastier than the boogery snacks he was used to.

He pulled away as much dead skin as he could, sometimes in long slivers which he immediately slurped up like paper-thin noodles.

Once he had scratched away every morsel of dead skin on his body, Scotty was disappointed. It tasted so good, and he wasn't nearly satisfied.

He tried to peel off just a tiny bit more, but this time it hurt, as he had accidentally ripped off some skin that wasn't quite dead. It wasn't much, but enough to make him bleed.

"I wonder what normal skin tastes like," he thought to himself. "It won't hurt me if I just eat this small piece."

Scotty held the bloody chunk of skin between his fingers, then dropped it on his tongue... Wonderful! Superb! To Scotty it tasted a bit like beef jerky, only better. He had to have more.

He started to peel more skin, trying as hard as he could to ignore the horrific, burning pain. Strip by strip, the thin, bloody slivers went into his mouth like disgusting pieces of string cheese. Scotty couldn't help himself, and he couldn't stop.

Hours had passed, and Scotty's mom hadn't seen him all day.

"Scotty, come down here, dinner's ready," she called, but there was no answer.

"Scotty!"

Still nothing. She walked up the stairs.

"Scotty, I made pork chops." But again, he didn't answer. "He must be asleep."

She walked to his bedroom door, knocked a few times, then turned the knob to open it.

“Hey, sleepyhead, dinner is—SCOTTY!”

Scotty was sitting in the dark, the skin of his arms, legs, and face torn away. He peeled off the last remaining morsel from his cheek, leaned his head back and dropped it into his mouth, as if it was a fine delicacy. A satisfied grin cut across his blood-soaked face.

“Scotty, what have you done to yourself!”

Scotty turned his head and looked at his horrified mother standing in the doorway.

“Well, Mom, at least I’m not picking my nose...”

THE MATCH

“Why don’t you try one of the dating apps?”

David was loudly munching on a bag of chips while lounging on the couch. His buddy, Connor, was in the recliner across the living room, apathetically flipping through the various television channels.

“I don’t know, man, I’ve always thought those things were kind of weird.”

“Why?” David asked, continuing to stuff his face with potato chips. “Everyone uses them now, and you’re not going to meet anyone just sitting in your apartment watching TV.”

Connor was incredibly shy and didn’t have a lot of confidence in himself. This made meeting girls especially difficult, as he could never work up the courage to go up and talk to someone.

“I guess it couldn’t hurt to try it.”

“Yes! I’ll even help you set up your profile.” David jumped up from the couch and snatched Connor’s phone out of his hand.

“Dude, come on...”

“Don’t worry, I’m a pro at this.”

Connor rolled his eyes, but he knew David had used these apps for years, so he probably knew what worked and what didn’t.

David downloaded the newest app, Ember, which was the current flavor of the month in terms of dating apps in the city. There were many to choose from, but Ember was where all the current activity was.

Connor just sat there and watched as David’s fingers and thumbs feverishly clicked and clacked on his phone, setting up his profile, selecting his pictures, and coming up with witty sayings for

his bio. It took David less than ten minutes to have it completely done.

“There you go, my man. Now all you have to do is swipe right or left. It’s as easy as that.”

David handed Connor his phone and flopped back down on the couch, continuing to devour the same bag of chips.

Connor looked down at his phone. An attractive blonde girl was staring back at him. “She’s way out of my league,” Connor thought. “There’s no way I’d have a chance.” So, he swiped left.

David piped up from the other side of the room. “Don’t over think it, man. If you like what you see, swipe right. If not, swipe left. It’s not rocket science.”

Connor continued swiping left and right, trying his best not to overanalyze each profile. But then he came to one that legitimately startled him.

The name was Greta. Her face was inhumanly long, with a large pointy chin, a wide, crooked grin, and icy blue eyes that somehow looked cold and emotionless despite their fiery appearance. She had stringy blonde hair and a slender nose that matched her frail looking neck and shoulders. Her skin was so pale it almost seemed grey in color. Every picture of her was the exact same, just her face grinning into the camera with a creepy head tilt. Her bio didn’t include her age or interests, it simply had one line: “I’m here to find love.”

Connor hated to judge solely off appearances, but Greta’s face actually scared him. He looked over at his forearm and noticed goosebumps erupting across his skin.

“David, you have to take a look at this girl.”

David perked up from his salty snack and looked over. “There’s no way that’s real. Probably some troll account.”



Connor looked at it again. “I don’t know what it is, but her face creeps me out.”

One final shiver went down Connor’s spine as he swiped left.

Immediately a firework animation started playing. “You’ve got a match!” the notification read.

“What? I swiped left and it matched me anyway.”

“Just go to your matches section and hit ‘unmatch.’”

Connor unmatched from Greta and then continued looking at other profiles.

But then Greta came back up.

Connor immediately swiped left. Again, the match notification started playing.

“What’s going on? It matched her with me again!”

David didn’t seem concerned. “Like I said, probably just a glitch or some troll account.”

Suddenly another notification popped up. A message from Greta. It simply read, “*Hello*” with a heart emoji.

Connor immediately unmatched her again. But as soon as he returned to the other profiles, Greta would pop-up over and over, and it would match every single time.

David walked over to see what was going on. “It’s definitely a glitch or some type of hacker. Let the developers figure it out and try again tomorrow. I’m sure you’re not the only one this is happening to. Definitely creepy though.”

A couple hours later, David had gone home and Connor was bored. He looked over at his phone lying on the coffee table and decided to fire up the Ember app again. He had to admit, it was an entertaining way to pass the time.

He picked up the phone and to his surprise he had a new match. Her name was Angie, 24, brown hair, brown eyes, attractive in that girl next door type of way. She was definitely Connor’s type.

Connor paced back and forth trying to come up with a good ice-breaker. He had to do better than “Hey”. Eventually he decided on a dumb joke he had heard a couple days earlier. He hit the message button and typed, “Why was the pepper nosey?”

Almost immediately a response came back from Angie: “Why? Lol.”

“Because it was jalapeno business...”

Again the response was immediate. “Lol, nice dad joke. I love it.”

From there Connor and Angie texted back and forth easily and chatted for hours until well past midnight. The two decided to meet up for a dinner date the very next day. And when the conversation ended, Connor plopped into his bed with a huge smile on his face. Maybe David was right, the dating apps weren’t so weird after all.

...

The next morning, Connor woke up and began his morning routine. He showered, made a cup of coffee, and turned on the local news. As he was brushing his teeth, a story from the television caught his attention.

“Heartbreaking news from the city’s west side. Early this morning at about 2 a.m., the body of 24-year-old Angie Callahan was found just outside the Plaza One Apartment complex. Initial reports from police suggest that the young woman fell from her 7th story balcony. No indications of foul play are currently being investigated.”

Connor dropped his toothbrush on the floor, the wet paste still foaming and bubbling around his lips.

He took one look at the television screen where the woman's picture was being displayed, and immediately recognized her. It was the same Angie he had been talking to the night before.

He opened the Ember app to make sure, but he immediately saw tons of new notifications from the night before, after he'd fallen asleep.

His heart jumped into his throat as soon as he looked at his phone display. "You have a new match!" Followed by thirteen unread messages, all from Greta...

Hello.

Hi Connor.

Please do not ignore me LOL

Connor. We would be perfect together.

Please answer.

Connor. STOP ignoring me.

You're making me angry Connor.

CONNOR. Answer ME!!!

You're my soulmate Connor.

I NEED you.

Answer me or I'm going to hurt someone LOL.

You better NOT be talking to any other girls.

I'm coming for you Connor. You will be mine XOXO.

Connor felt sick to his stomach. He immediately called his friend David to tell him what happened. He wanted to delete the Ember app right then and there, but David convinced him to keep it just in case the police reached out to him, especially considering he may have been the last person to talk to Angie.

Connor took a personal day from work to gather himself. The news of Angie's death weighed heavy on his thoughts, even

though he never met her in person, and only shared one text conversation. Plus, he couldn't shake the feeling there was more to Greta than a simple troll account or hacker.

He stopped by the police department to see if maybe his conversation with Angie might yield any clues as to what happened to her. Maybe it wasn't just an accident. He showed them the Greta account as well.

The police officers thanked him and told him they would be in touch if any new evidence popped up.

As soon as Connor walked out of the police station, he deleted his Ember account. After less than 24 hours, he'd had enough of dating apps.

Later that evening, Connor was lying on his couch, barely paying attention to an old 80s sci-fi movie. He didn't feel like doing anything productive as the whole situation depressed him, especially considering he would have been on a date with Angie instead of spending another night lying on his couch eating junk food. Not to mention the terrible circumstances for why that date wasn't occurring.

"What a horrific thing to happen," he mumbled to himself.

Suddenly his text message notification chimed from his phone. It came from an unknown number.

"Hi, Connor. It's Greta."

Connor nearly dropped the phone.

"How did she get my number?" he yelled.

The back of Connor's neck started to get warm, he could feel the frustration and anger building inside of him. He decided to respond:

"I don't know who this is, or if it's even a real person. But please stop contacting me. I'm NOT interested."

A little bubble with an ellipsis popped up showing that the other person was responding.

“Well, that’s not very nice, Connor. Especially considering our date tonight.”

Connor’s temper started to boil over. “What date? I never agreed to a date with you. Please STOP contacting me!”

There wasn’t a response for several minutes after that. Connor was hoping that Greta, or whoever she was, finally got the message.

Then the text notification chimed again.

“It’s far too late to cancel now. I’m right outside your door.”

Connor’s stomach dropped and twisted into knots. He slowly walked over to the apartment entrance and looked in the peephole.

Greta’s horrific face filled up the viewing area. Her cold blue eyes drawing down into a twisted smile that kept getting wider and wider. Her teeth were clenched together so hard that her elongated head started to shake. She then pulled away from the door, showing her tall, emaciated body wearing nothing but a tattered night gown. She barely looked human.

She scratched at the door with her fingernails and started to whisper...

“Let me in, Connor.”

“Let me in...”

“Connor... LET ME IN!”

Greta started pounding on the door. “LET ME IN, CONNOR. I LOVE YOU!”

Connor rushed over to his kitchen area and grabbed a knife. He screamed toward the doorway, “Leave me alone! I’m calling the cops!”

Connor dialed 9-1-1 and an operator immediately answered the call.

“This is 911, what is your emergency?”

Connor had so much adrenaline running through his body he could barely speak. “There’s a woman pounding on my apartment door demanding I let her in. There’s something wrong with her.”

“Okay, calm down and—”

“Hello! Hello, are you there?” Connor’s voice trembled as he became more frantic.

The call was suddenly cut off by a strange static that hissed over the line.

“Let...me...in...”

Connor dropped the phone and backed away in horror. Then BAM!!! The front door crashed open.

Greta leaned her grotesque head into the room, ducking under the top of the door as she...or it...was too tall to simply walk in. Her eyes widened as she saw Connor standing in the kitchen, and drool started dripping from her freakish smile.

“Hello, Connor.”

Connor screamed and threw the knife at her, then ran into his bedroom and slammed the door shut, immediately locking it. He grabbed his baseball bat and leaned up against the back wall, waiting to see if she could get through.

He could see the shadow under the door as Greta twisted the door handle, trying to get in.

“I had to do something bad to make sure you were available tonight, Connor. That girl wasn’t right for you.”

“Leave me alone!” Connor screamed.

Suddenly the lock snapped, and the door slowly swung open. Greta stood in the darkness of the hallway for a moment, the silhouette of her impossibly long limbs leading up to her hideous smile.

Connor clinched the handle of his bat as Greta slowly entered the room, her monstrous figure being revealed in the light.

“What are you...” Connor mumbled, his voice shaking with fear.

Greta’s smile got so wide the corners of her mouth were nearly touching her eyes, her voice then changed to a low, distorted growl...

“I’m the love of your life.”

Greta suddenly rushed forward.

“NOW GIVE ME A KISS!”

Connor’s blood-curdling scream echoed throughout the entire complex.

...

Two blocks away, David was scrolling through social media on his phone. There was an update on Connor’s profile:

“Connor has changed his relationship status from single to: It’s complicated.”

Connor was never seen again.

BURIED

Tom's eyes ripped open, his lungs gasping for air as if he'd just emerged from a pool of icy water. All he could sense was complete darkness, and a silence so overwhelming he thought he could hear the pulse of his internal organs.

Tom's mind was a jumbled mess. He was disoriented and confused, as if he was stuck halfway between a dream and reality. But as each second ticked by, the haze in his mind started to ease.

As he slowly came out of his comatose state, his breathing started to become frantic and heavy... He couldn't feel the rest of his body.

"Where am I? I can't move, I can't see... I can barely breathe!" his mind screamed.

Even just a couple seconds of paralysis within the black void was absolute torture. But after about a minute, the feeling started to slowly return to his limbs, and he could slightly move his fingers and toes.

The total blackness of his surroundings made it difficult to tell if his eyes were working or if he had gone blind, but he could feel his eyelids opening and closing. Then a few moments later, he was able to sluggishly move his arms, legs, and neck. They were beyond stiff, and his joints burst with a sickening crack at the slightest movement, but Tom welcomed the sound, as it meant his body wasn't completely disabled.

His fingertips ran along the edge of his thigh, noting that a soft padded material was all around him. He pressed into the material until his hand was stopped by something hard and immovable.



He only had a few inches of mobility to his left, right, and directly above him... That's when the realization hit him—Tom was inside a coffin.

His heart rate exploded, and his stomach twisted in knots as the grim reality of his situation became clear.

Screaming for help was an automatic reaction, almost like a reflex.

“Help! Someone help me!”

But he quickly cut himself off. If he was indeed inside a coffin, and buried six feet under, no one would ever hear his screams. Not only that, but he would be wasting precious oxygen and energy.

Even with only half his mind correctly functioning, Tom knew he didn't have much time. Soon he would use whatever oxygen was left inside the coffin, and slowly but surely, he would suffocate like a goldfish gasping outside its bowl.

His thoughts were thrashing between how to deal with his current situation, and how he managed to wind up there in the first place. The absolute last thing he remembered was simply eating a bowl of warm soup... Was it tomato? Was it chicken noodle? He couldn't remember. Only that soon after, everything went completely black.

“Think, Tom, think!”

Tom wasn't one to give up easily and he'd always been a fighter. Since he was still alive, that meant he hadn't been there for long, and he still had some time. Then he thought of his wife, Sarah, and how he desperately wanted to see her again.

After about five torturous minutes, Tom felt like he had regained enough mobility and strength that he could start forming a plan.

He started feeling all around him, utilizing what little room he had. He was wearing a dress shirt and tie, there was a bouquet of

flowers, and there were some pieces of paper by his side which he assumed were letters of some kind. It was obvious that whoever had buried him definitely thought he was dead.

But how was this possible? He was only thirty years old and in perfect health. And even so, did they not embalm him? Tom couldn't waste any additional time thinking about how he got into this predicament, he needed to find a way out, and quick.

He started taking note of anything he could use to rip open the padded cloth above him. He had a watch on, and a metal tie clip, but nothing in his pockets. There was, however, a heavy steel picture frame with glass. Probably the wedding photo with Sarah that sat on the coffee table in the living room. Perfect.

Tom quickly undid his tie and wrapped it around his hand, then smashed the glass, and grabbed a large shard. He immediately started tearing at the cloth above him. Success! It tore away easily as he ripped open the soft material and pushed it down toward his legs. He then turned his thoughts to what was behind the cloth padding, to what would ultimately determine his fate.

Tom and Sarah were not rich by any means. In fact, they were quite poor. But with all the misfortune and financial hardships they had experienced, it was those same hardships that could possibly save him, at least for the moment.

Tom slowly reached up and touched the hard material with his fingertips. Wood, cheap wood.

So cheap in fact that it was already bending slightly inward under the weight of what he assumed was five or six feet of dirt.

Sarah wouldn't have been able to afford an expensive casket, and that likely explained why Tom wasn't embalmed; it was simply cheaper to skip that part of the burial process. And she never liked the idea of cremation.

The sliver of hope that began to emerge was quickly stifled by the realization his breathing was getting heavier and heavier. Tom was quickly running out of oxygen, and he estimated he only had about a half hour at most if he could control his breathing.

With the cloth material out of the way, Tom had several inches of space above him to work with, enough that he could deliver a moderately powerful blow with his fist. He felt for what seemed like the weakest spot in the wood, where it had sunken in the most from the weight of the dirt.

Tom took one large, deep breath in, clinched his hand into a ball and smashed it into the surface above him. He followed it up with another heavy blow, then another, and another. He could feel the wood giving in slightly as his knuckles slammed into it, but it wasn't close to breaking. This wasn't going to work.

At that moment his stomach again twisted in a knot, the little bit of air within the coffin seemed to rapidly increase in temperature, like a thick suffocating blanket being forced upon his face. Adrenaline was surging through his veins as claustrophobia took an unforgiving grip around his throat.

"Calm down, Tom, calm down," he repeated over and over again. "What else can I do? Don't give up yet."

Tom grabbed the picture frame. It was made from industrial steel, a gift from his welding friend who had been trying to teach him the trade a few years back.

He pointed the corner of the frame towards the weak area of warped wood, took another deep breath, and smashed the steel corner into the casket's ceiling. Repeatedly, he drove the hard edge of the frame into the spot directly above him... But nothing happened.

"No!" he screamed. "This can't be happening!" Tom started to sob. "*How* can this be happening."

The air coming into his throat started to get thicker and thicker. Tom was quickly running out of time.

Another burst of adrenaline hit Tom's system like an electric shock. He wasn't ready to accept his fate. This couldn't be how he went out.

He gnashed his teeth in rage. "I will NOT die like this!"

He pressed the steel corner into the slumping wood again. He thought about his wife, he thought about his parents, his friends, all the life he had left to live, and how he was so close to turning things around.

He screamed with a fury he had never known before and pressed upwards with every ounce of strength he had, as if he was lifting a car off his chest. His arms were trembling in spasms, the muscle fibers feeling as if they were about to explode.

"I will NOT die like this. NOT. LIKE. THIS!"

Craaaacckkk!!!!

The bulging wood splintered and snapped, and cold dirt started falling over his hands and arms.

"Yes! YES!"

Tom reached up and felt the wood. He had opened about a six-inch gash. He put his fingers into the loose earth and grabbed the splintered edge of the crack, pulling as hard as he could. A huge chunk of wood broke off into his hand as more dirt started to pour inside the casket.

Tom coughed as debris briefly found its way into his lungs. He grabbed the top of his shirt and used it to cover his nose and mouth as he furiously pushed the streaming dirt down toward his legs. Once he had broken off the first chunk of wood, the top of the casket was easy to break away.

Dirt continued to stream in, quickly building on top of his chest as he created a larger and larger hole. His right hand would break

away the casket's ceiling as his left hand pushed the incoming soil away from his upper torso.

After about five minutes, Tom had created an opening large enough that he could nearly sit up.

He continued clawing into the dirt above like a rabid animal trying to escape its cage. Soon he was able to maneuver both legs into a kneeling position as the loose earth continued to rain down around him.

It wasn't long before Tom could firmly plant his feet on the casket floor and use the full strength of his legs. He was nearly standing upright. His mind was an absolute blur of emotion and hope...

"I'm going to make it... I'm going to GET OUT!"

Tom made one final push and slammed his fist into the soil above, and then...*freedom*.

A cold wind slithered across his right hand as tears started streaming from his irritated, dirt-covered eyes.

His left arm was then able to break through. And finally, the grimy skin of Tom's face felt the chill of the October night.

Tom's head emerged from the earth and he immediately filled his lungs with crisp autumn air. It was the finest, most satisfying breath he had ever taken.

Tom pulled his body from the would-be tomb, and once he removed the last limb from the hole in which he emerged, Tom broke down and wept.

"I did it..."

With that thought, his joyful tears turned into a cackling laughter. Only a brush with death could elicit such a fantastic feeling of relief.

Tom slowly stood up, took another deep, satisfying breath and looked up into the clear October sky. A perfect full moon was shining brightly down upon him.

He looked back at the grave he had just emerged from and could only smirk at the tombstone that read his name.

“Not today.” He smiled.

Tom looked around at the cemetery he was in. It was Bridlewood Cemetery. He knew it well as it was only a couple blocks from his house.

How was he going to explain this? Who was going to explain what happened to him? And how would his family and friends react? Tom didn’t have the answers, he just knew he wanted to see his wife, and with that thought, he walked through the cemetery gates and made his way home.

...

It only took about fifteen minutes to reach his driveway. From what Tom could gather, it was extremely late as there weren’t any lights on in the neighborhood. His house was the exception, as the living room was dimly lit with the glow of a TV set.

He slowly approached the window and looked in. Sarah was lying on the couch, sobbing and holding a picture of Tom in her hands.

“I have to do this delicately or I’m going to scare her to death,” he thought. “But I guess there’s just no easy way.”

Tom walked to the door and took another long, deep breath. His heart was pounding with a mixture of excitement, and the unknown. He reached out with his hand...and knocked.

After a few moments, Sarah opened the door. It only took a single glance at her husband, covered in dirt and grime, for her to

fall to her knees, the air violently sucked from her lungs in disbelief. She couldn't even speak, only silently mouth the name "Tom."

Tom rushed down and pulled Sarah into his arms.

"It's me, Sarah. This is real, I'm alive... I swear to you this is real."

Tom put his dirt covered hand on her cheek to let her know she wasn't hallucinating.

"B-but...how?" she murmured.

"I don't know, I truly don't...but I'm here. I promise this is me."

"The doctors... the aneurysm... You died, Tom. You died."

Tom had a hard time speaking as tears streamed down his face. "I didn't die, Sarah. I literally crawled out of my grave to get back to you."

"It's not possible."

"It is possible. I'm here, I'm alive."

Tom held her in his arms as she sobbed in disbelief. He smelled her sweet perfume and held her as she cried.

Sarah gently put her hand on Tom's face. "But we buried you a week ago."

Tom paused. "What? That can't be true, there's no way I could have survi..."

His voice trailed off as he looked up into the entry-way mirror and caught the first glimpse of himself. His skin was tinted a pale green, and his eyes were unnaturally red, beaming through his dirt-covered complexion like the effect of a poorly taken photo.

Tom's voice started to tremble. "What's happening to me?"

At that moment, the piercing sound of the emergency broadcast system ripped across the room from the television.

Tom tried to listen to the message, but he couldn't concentrate, as the sweet smell of Sarah's perfume was suddenly overwhelmed by something entirely different. It was a succulent, hypnotizing scent that was savory and mouthwatering. It dominated all of Tom's senses, commanding his absolute attention. He couldn't ignore it no matter how hard he tried.

It was the smell of human flesh...and with it came an excruciating hunger that ached deeply in Tom's stomach.

THALASSOPHOBIA

If you love the ocean, I simply can't understand,
I'd rather be safe, standing firmly on land.
Ponds are no different, nor swamps, or a lake,
Stay away from them all, there's too much at stake.

If I go to the beach, I stick close to the shore.
And if I enter the water, it's to my knees, no more.
I look out at the waves, to a sea of unknown,
What lurks within could chill your bones.

The water itself is a cause for fear,
It can pull you under, where no one can hear.
You can hold your breath, swim with all your might,
But when it fills your lungs, you lose the fight.

You suffocate in darkness, where you gasp and choke,
It's a painful death, a horrible way to croak.
But the water alone is just the start of the danger,
It's a sea of nightmares, all of them stranger.

Imagine floating alone, with nothing but the deep,
Then chills through your spine, as something touches your feet.
The shadow is massive, coming fast from beneath,
Then you peek under the waves, and see nothing but teeth.

There are creatures underwater, some that remain unseen,
With tentacles and fangs to rip out your spleen.
They'll feast on your flesh, while you drown in red,
A fate no man deserves, yet why many are dead.

Each year it happens, there are at least a few,
They're eaten alive while in the ocean blue.
Sometimes a shark, a hammerhead or white,
Or something much bigger, even more of a fright.

The sea is a mystery, only a fraction is known,
We don't know what's out there, so don't swim alone.
They'll never find your body, a thought quite drab,
Or maybe your limbs wash up, slowly eaten by crabs.

Respect the water, it's not the home of man,
It's the domain of monsters, an alien land.
So next time you float in the ocean so vast,
Remember what's out there, I hope you swim fast.



SILVERFISH

“What else can I help with?” Emma shouted frantically to her parents as they taped over the edges of the basement door.

Emma’s dad threw her a roll of electrical tape and handed over a large sealant gun from his toolbelt.

“I want you to cover every corner, every edge, and every hole in this basement. Leave absolutely nothing exposed. I’ll try and seal up everything else as best I can. And if you see a bug, kill it!”

Emma’s mom then handed her a large bottle of insect repellent.

“I want you to pour this all over you—your hair, your clothes, every inch.”

Emma quickly doused herself in the bitter smelling liquid and immediately went to work sealing every crack and crevice she could find.

There was a single small window on the back wall. She rushed over to tape the edges and took a brief moment to look outside. It was just big enough to view the night sky, and she could see a large streak of white light ripping across the stars.

“I can see the comet from the window.”

Emma’s dad rushed over to take a look. “Good, we’ll know when it’s gone. We just gotta make it twelve more hours; that’s when they say it’ll be over. Watch out real quick, let me seal this up.”

Emma stepped back as her dad applied thick black sealant where the window opened.

As she stepped back, she saw six huge centipedes make their way through a small hole in the wall. They immediately darted towards her foot.

Emma screamed as the first two scurried up her pant leg and immediately tried to burrow into her skin. She smashed her fist against her leg, killing them, as her dad stomped out the rest.

“Cover that hole right now!” he shouted.

Tears ran down Emma’s face as she plugged the hole. “Why is this happening?”

“It’s the comet, Emma. You heard it just like we did. Something about it is making the bugs extremely aggressive. They’re coming after anything warm blooded.”

Soon the outside of the window was completely covered by insects of all kinds, hissing and screeching, trying to get inside the basement to feast on Emma and her family.

After covering as many openings and cracks as they could, Emma and her parents could only sit in the middle of the cold basement and try and wait out the night, hoping the comet, and whatever effect it was having on Earth’s insects, would soon pass.

The family sat in silence listening to a small radio Emma’s mom had plugged in. There were no broadcasts, just continuous emergency messages telling everyone to stay indoors and shelter as best they could.

Emma applied more insect repellent as a harrowing thought struck her.

“What if we run out of air? We’ve covered any way for oxygen to get in here.”

Her dad stood up and walked around the room. “This basement is just big enough we should be fine.”

He walked up the stairs and examined the basement door. He could hear scraping and chittering on the other side—a massive army of bugs crawling on the wood, trying to eat their way in.

A couple hours passed, and the air seemed to get thicker and thicker as the oxygen levels in the room slowly dropped.



Emma couldn't just sit in silence; her heart was pounding. She could feel the walls closing in as the adrenaline flowed through her veins. Her anxiety felt like it was crushing her lungs.

She looked over at the thick wall of bugs on the other side of the window, thousands upon thousands of them. She couldn't help but notice there were a ton of silverfish.

Emma hated silverfish.

Their house had a particular problem with them and growing up she'd always find a few in her bedroom, darting across the walls, and even her bedsheets when she slept. They were incredibly quick, and just the sight of them was enough to turn her stomach.

"Ten quintillion," her mom piped up. "That's how many they estimate there are in the world. Ten quintillion bugs. It has to be absolutely horrible out there. They're coming after everything."

Emma's dad went to check on the door again, making sure the sealant on the edges was holding up. "Hopefully we just have to make it about eight more hours."

Suddenly there was a scratching sound coming from the furnace vent pipes running across the ceiling of the basement.

Emma's dad walked directly under it to get a better look. "Shh, be quiet. They've made their way into the—"

CRACK!

The pipe broke and dropped down. A waterfall of insects flowed over Emma's dad, spilling into the room. Centipedes, ants, beetles, spiders, cockroaches; they covered every inch of his body. He started screaming as the bugs wasted no time burrowing into his flesh.

"Help me! Help!"

But all Emma and her mom could do was watch in horror as the bugs ate him alive with frightening efficiency.

Emma's mom grabbed her hand. "We need to make a run for the car!"

They ran up the stairs and ripped open the door. A wall of bugs immediately cascaded over them. Emma's mom fell back and went tumbling down the stairs. Emma heard the snap of her leg as she smashed into the cold concrete floor.

"Emma, RUN!"

It only took a second for the mass of creatures to descend upon Emma's mom, her blood curdling screams piercing the air.

Emma was covered with bugs, but she was still able to run through the house. The white walls were nearly black; millions of insects covered every inch. Those that could fly immediately came after her.

Emma barely noticed herself screaming in terror as she ran for the garage door, insects crawling inside her shirt and pants and squirming through her hair.

She opened the door and went straight to the side of the garage, to a large pesticide sprayer her dad used for the lawn. She doused herself in the chemicals, killing most of the bugs on her body but burning her skin with the corrosive liquid.

She then went straight for the Jeep, knowing there was a set of spare keys in the dash.

Luckily the bugs hadn't made it inside the car yet.

Emma fired up the engine, opened the garage door and slammed the Jeep in reverse towards the road.

Tears streamed down her face as the chemicals continued to burn her face, arms, and legs.

She flew down the neighborhood street, not knowing where to go, just that she needed to keep moving.

A massive swarm of wasps soon descended upon her car, covering most of the windows. Emma didn't even see the other car coming.

SMASH!

The Jeep flipped multiple times before it came to rest on its side within a large ditch. The twisted metal pinned Emma against the steering wheel as blood flowed from a large gash in her forehead.

She was trapped.

She couldn't see the other car, but she could hear the screams of the driver as the wasps stung him, devouring him alive.

Emma was dazed and drifting in and out of consciousness. She looked over at the passenger seat.

A small silverfish crawled into the car and just sat there looking at her. Then it was joined by another, and another.

The chittering and hissing got louder and louder as it made its way through the tall grass toward the Jeep.

Silverfish, thousands of them.

Emma knew this was the end. She simply looked out the broken glass towards the night sky. The comet was as bright as ever, traveling thousands of miles per hour, but seeming as if it was barely moving. It was beautiful in a way, something she had never seen before.

Emma kept her eyes locked on that sight, the screeching of the bugs getting closer and closer as the first silverfish scurried upon her neck.

THE HIKE

Grant knew better than to go hiking alone. Even someone as experienced as himself could make a mistake or get caught in some unpredictable weather. Anything can happen in wilderness of the pacific northwest, especially in the rural areas furthest from civilization, which were Grant's favorite.

But it was a perfect day, the morning sun was shining and there was a crispness in the fall air that electrified his senses, especially since he'd been stuck in the city for the last couple of weeks. It was simply an opportunity too good to pass up.

Grant fired off a few texts to his sister and best friend, letting them know he was going on a hike "just in case" and that he would update the with exact coordinates once he got to his destination.

After loading up his car and filling his thermos with coffee, Grant set off on the road. It was about a two-hour drive to a little-known trail that was fifty miles from the Canadian border. Stories about the area had been making their way around local hiking circles, and evidently the views were breathtaking, complete with a massive waterfall known as Red Widow Falls.

Grant couldn't wait to get there. Nothing re-charged him like a long, difficult trail into the wilderness. Something about it felt exciting and primal, and even though it wasn't the safest thing in the world, he was glad he was going alone.

The location of the trail was a bit of a secret, as Grant had to pull up detailed directions a friend had sent him. After taking an exit off the highway in the middle of nowhere, Grant followed a narrow county road deep into the forest. He was looking for an

entrance to a second road, which was supposedly marked by a large boulder. There were no other markings or signs.

After about twenty minutes of driving, Grant finally saw the large gray rock buried into a small hill and covered with a thick green moss. And just to the left of it, a dirt road nestled in between a corridor of fir trees.

Grant turned his small sedan onto the path and continued driving deeper into the forest. At this point the foliage was so thick the sun had a hard time peeking through the branches and leaves.

Eventually, the road came to an open clearing, where the sun was able to poke through and illuminate the area. A large rock formation loomed over Grant's car, preventing him from driving any further. A small path was cut through it that led to higher ground.

Grant grabbed his gear from the backseat of his car and pulled his backpack onto his shoulders. He reached down for his cell phone, which miraculously still had service, and fired off his location data to his sister. He then took a deep breath of brisk, clean air and started toward the rocky barrier in front of him.

While it wasn't a vertical rock climb, it was definitely steep enough to be dangerous. It was just the type of challenge Grant enjoyed.

With his legs burning, it took Grant around thirty minutes to make it to the top of the rocky hill.

"Maybe I'm not in as good shape as I thought," he muttered to himself.

But as soon as he pulled himself over the ridge, an epic view nearly took his breath away.

The forest opened up to a massive canyon cut into the landscape, almost as if someone had purposely dug out a huge chunk of the wilderness.

A winding river ran through the middle, cutting into the rock over thousands of years. Its harsh bend was responsible for the circular shape of the canyon, and was what caused such a stark contrast between the dark, dense forest and the sprawling openness bathed in sunlight.

And far off in the distance, on the opposite end of the canyon, Grant could see it: Red Widow Falls.

The trail was orchestrated around the outer rim of the canyon and was obviously meant to lead to the waterfall. However, Grant also wanted to make his way down to the base and explore that area, which looked to be about 150 feet down with no clear path to reach it.

Grant decided he'd just continue on the regular trail and once he got near the waterfall, that's when he'd try and find a way down to the river.

After about two hours, Grant decided to stop and take a quick break. The bowl-like nature of the canyon allowed him to look down over the slim area of forestry that ran along the river on each side. It was teeming with wildlife...deer, eagles, foxes, owls, even a black bear, which was a quick reminder that he was completely alone in the wilderness.

Grant grabbed his cell phone from his pocket to snap a few photos. But just as he raised his arm to position for a selfie, a faint sound cut through the murmurs of the forest. It was barely audible coming from the base of canyon.

"Heelllp... Heeelllp me..."

Grant squinted his eyes and looked to an area of thick brush leading into a group of large pines next to the river. He could see the torso of a man almost completely covered by the tall grass, most of the clothing had been ripped from his body.

Again, the voice called out, *"Pleeease... Please helllp me."*

“I hear you! I can see you!” Grant called out. Another hiker must have gotten too close to the edge and fell.

“Hold tight! I’m going to get you some help!” he yelled.

The man wasn’t moving, just lying there covered in wet grass.

Grant pulled out his cell phone. No signal this time, likely blocked by the surrounding environment.

“I can’t get a signal here! I’m going to try and find a spot where I can call someone!”

“Pleeease, help... I need helllp...”

Grant hesitated for a moment. The smart thing would be for him to go back to his car where he knew he could get a cell signal, but the thought of the wildlife in the area crept back into his mind. The man would be helpless if that black bear stumbled upon him, or even worse, wolves.

“Okay, okay, I’m going to climb down. Just hold on!”

Grant surveyed the area going down to the river. There seemed to be a small path where it wasn’t a straight drop.

He took off his backpack and lowered himself over the edge. His thoughts were screaming at him, “Grant, this is *STUPID*.” But the adrenaline seemed to be pushing him on.

Rock by rock, boulder by boulder, Grant made his way down. All the while the man in the grass kept calling out to him.

“Pleeease help me.”

After about twenty minutes, Grant’s foot finally hit the reddish dirt at the bottom of the canyon.

“Okay, I made it! I—”

But the man was gone.

“Hello? Hello! Where are you!”

Silence.



Grant slowly walked over to the tall grass where the man had been lying. All that was left was the imprint of a body and a strange odor of decay and decomposition.

Suddenly a low grumble slithered from the deep shadow of the pines.

“Hello?”

Grant peered into the darkness and saw the decomposing corpse of a man, half eaten, held up like a nightmarish puppet. Long, inhuman fingers were wrapped around the corpse’s neck, manipulating what was left of the man’s vocal cords.

Red, glowing eyes peered around the corpse’s shoulder as the hand around the corpse’s neck tightened. The mouth of the dead hiker started to move as it gurgled, “*I seeee yoouuu.*”

Grant immediately turned to run, but the skittering sound of something sprinting through the grass soon caught him.

A horrid scream echoed across the canyon as Grant was violently pulled into the thick brush of the tree line.

...

The flashing lights of a police SUV slowly pulled up to Grant’s empty car sitting at the base of the rock formation. Nightfall had come, and it had been twelve hours since anyone heard from Grant. His sister immediately notified the area’s search and rescue team when he didn’t check in with her.

A grizzled officer stepped out and looked into Grant’s car, then started surveying the area.

“This is the third missing hiker in the last month around here.”

A younger deputy followed behind him, his flashlight following the trail carved into the rocks. “Looks like we’re going to have to do some climbing.”

Suddenly a faint voice cut through the air as the wind whipped through the trees.

“Hellllp meeee.”

The silhouette of a man then appeared at the top of the rock formation, partially obscured by tree branches and brush.

“Grant Parker? Is that you?” the deputy called out.

“Yeessss, pleeeeee help meee.”

“Okay! Just hold tight, we’ll be right up there!”

The deputy rushed back to the truck to grab some gear, but the older officer forcefully grabbed his arm.

“Hold on a sec, somethin’ ain’t right.”

The older officer aimed his flashlight the best he could at the figure standing above them. He couldn’t see much, but Grant was oddly swaying back and forth, his head slumped to the side with something wrapped around his neck.

“Hey, Grant, stay right there, we’re gonna call in some medics. We’ll let your sister know we found you. Her name’s Lisa right?”

The silhouette continued to lurch and sway. “Yesssss, pleeeeee helllp.”

The officer unholstered his pistol, as he whispered to the deputy, “Get back in the truck right now.”

“Why? What’s wrong?”

The officer slowly made his way towards the SUV, keeping his eyes locked on the swaying silhouette. “Abby. His sister’s name is Abby.”

HOLES

“What’s going on with your hand?”

Logan’s head jerked up, snapped out of his daydream by his friend Drew sitting next to him in class. His eyes then followed the mechanical pencil in his right hand down to his palm, which was raw and irritated.

“I don’t know, man, it’s been itching all day. Probably just a rash or something.”

Drew shrugged. “Looks kinda like poison ivy.”

Logan set his pencil down. His science teacher, Mr. Anderson, was droning on about something in the background. Logan brought his hand closer to his face to inspect what was going on. Tiny clusters of fluid filled blisters had formed in the soft fatty area below his ring finger and next to his thumb.

Drew leaned over to get a better look. “That’s pretty gnarly, man. I’d go to the nurse if I were you.”

Logan sighed. “Yeah, you’re right. It’s weird though, these blisters just kind of popped up in the last couple of hours.”

Suddenly the bell rang. Everyone quickly gathered up their things and rushed out the doorway.

“Make sure you guys read the chapter on Suriname toads! We’ll be dissecting one next week. Hope you guys don’t have trypophobia!” Mr. Anderson said with a laugh.

“Trypo-what?”

“You’ll see, Drew, you’ll see. Chapter 14. We’ll see everyone tomorrow.”

Sharp prickles of pain stung Logan’s hand as he grabbed his books and headed towards the hallway. “Well, maybe I’ll get out of 7th period and they’ll let me go home early.”



Drew smirked. “Always looking at the bright side.”

The two parted ways as Logan made his way past the front office towards the nurse. The pain seemed to get worse by the second, his fingers starting to throb.

...

“Okay, Logan, let’s see what we’re dealing with here.” Nurse Miller grabbed his right hand and examined it under a small light. “Oh my, I’m no dermatologist but this looks like a pretty nasty case of poison ivy. I’m going to give you some cortisone cream and some antihistamine pills. We’ll go ahead and wrap it up too.”

Nurse Miller applied some greasy white cream to the blistered areas and covered Logan’s palm with a large bandage.

“If this gets worse, I want you to go to your doctor or an urgent care, okay?”

“Yeah, I got it. It really hurts though.”

“Well, the cream I just put on there should help. Just keep an eye on it.”

“Any chance I can go home early?”

A smile crept through Nurse Miller’s red lipstick. “I think you’ll be able to survive one more hour. Now go ahead and get back to class.”

Logan chuckled. “Can’t blame me for trying. Thanks for fixing me up.

“No problem, just make sure to keep that clean so it doesn’t get infected. Have a good afternoon”

...

Later that evening, Logan was lying on his bed doing homework. The pain in his hand continued to bother him, but he tried his best to ignore it.

“Okay, Chapter 14. Let’s read about some amphibians.”

Logan flipped through his science book and was immediately greeted by a large picture of a female Suriname toad. His jaw immediately dropped.

The Suriname toad, also called the star-fingered toad, had hundreds of eggs embedded into the flesh of its back. As Logan read on, he learned that the tadpoles developed inside these...holes...in the skin, and when they were ready, they crawled out of the honeycomb-like cavities and swam away. The young toads literally erupted from the female’s back, a truly disgusting display. He then learned about other animals and insects that had a similar method of depositing eggs into the flesh. The thought alone made his stomach turn.

“Okay, I think that’s enough for tonight,” he mumbled.

Logan’s hand started throbbing again, and the itching was nearly unbearable. He grabbed another antihistamine pill and popped it into his mouth. Soon the sedative effect started, and Logan drifted off to sleep just twenty minutes later.

...

“Aaaaagghhh!”

Logan’s eyes shot open. Sharp, stabbing pains pierced his hand, again and again like an electric shock. He immediately leaned over and turned on the light.

Logan’s eyes widened in terror as his hand was swollen to nearly twice the normal size. The white bandages around his palm were now soaked in dark blood.

He frantically tore away at the medical tape, ripping it off to reveal an intestine-twisting sight. The blisters had all ruptured into puss filled abscesses. Deep fleshy holes pitted across his hand. And within those nightmarish cavities squirmed tiny larvae, slowly inching their way into the light.

Author's note: Trypophobia refers to the strong fear or disgust of small, clustered holes, especially in organic material, such as flesh. It is very real. Look it up if you dare. But remember, you were warned.

THE CRAVING

“You know, Jon, for such a skinny guy you can really put down the food!” Mr. Jenson exclaimed while sitting at the head of dinner table. He was an older gentleman, the outdoorsy type with a thick beard and sturdy frame.

Jon looked up while chewing on a large, juicy piece of steak, the grease dripping down his chin.

“It’s all the hiking I’ve been doing. I just can’t get enough to eat! Plus, Mrs. Jenson, you’re one heck of a cook. I gotta say.”

Jon stuffed a big spoon of mashed potatoes into his mouth.

“Thanks again for hosting me. You guys have really been great. I’ve never done one of these BnB deals before. It definitely beats staying at a run-down motel.”

Mrs. Jenson grabbed a serving dish and plunked down another chunk of steak onto Jon’s plate. “Well, you eat up, hon. We’re happy to have you. It’s nice to have visitors every so often. After all it gets kind of lonely out here in the woods, just the two of us.”

Jon continued to scarf down whatever he could get his hands on. His hunger was nearly insatiable.

“So, have you seen anything interesting out there on your hikes?” Mr. Jenson asked.

“Oh yeah, all sorts of stuff. It’s amazing up here in Canada. The wilderness is just different from anywhere in the States and I’ve hiked all over the place.”

“Anything worth telling us?”

“Well...and you’ll probably laugh at this, but just yesterday I was hiking up that northern pass near the foothills, and I looked over and I swear I saw some type of animal standing upright on

two legs. It was just staring at me from the shadow of the trees. I don't know what it was, but I got out of there quick. Freaked me out for sure."

Mrs. Jenson piped up, "Oh, maybe you saw our famous sasquatch. There's at least a couple sightings every year around these parts."

Jon laughed. "Can't say I believe in ole Bigfoot, but it was definitely something. Probably just a black bear scratching an itch on a tree. I didn't stick around long enough to find out."

Mr. Jenson glanced at his wife, then gazed out into the darkness of the forest through the window in the dining room, his expression turning stoic and solemn. "Maybe it was the Wendigo."

Jon chuckled. "You mean that thing with the antlers?"

"They don't have antlers, not sure where that idea came from, but they're nasty looking creatures. Tall, grey, emaciated things. The natives use to tell stories about 'em, saying they take hold of your soul if you eat another man's flesh. Turns you into one of them. That's if they don't eat you first...and they're always hungry."

Jon stopped eating for a moment, analyzing Mr. Jenson's expression. "You're joking, right? You don't actually believe that."

Suddenly, almost on cue, a piercing howl echoed far off in the distance. Jon's face immediately turned pale. Then Mr. Jenson erupted into laughter.

"I'm just joshin' ya, son! That's just a wolf howlin' at the moon. Happens every night. Boy, oh boy, you shoulda seen the look on your face!"

"Oh, Pete, stop, you're gonna scare the boy to death." Mrs. Jenson chuckled nervously.

Jon just smiled and shook his head. "Yeah, yeah, you got me."



Later that evening, Jon was tossing and turning in the darkness of his bedroom. His stomach was growling so loud it sounded like a small animal was trapped inside his gut.

“How am I still hungry?” he thought to himself. “I just need a snack. Hopefully they won’t mind if I grab something from the kitchen.”

As Jon sat up, another distant howl cut through the silence of the night. Goosebumps erupted on his skin as he pulled on a shirt and walked to the door. He briefly glanced outside the window, even though every ounce of his brain told him not to. There was nothing but the faint light of a crescent moon illuminating the pine trees.

“You’re really going to let that old man’s story get to you, huh,” he mumbled to himself.

Jon opened the door of the bedroom and slowly crept out into the kitchen area, the floor whining and creaking with each step as he made his way to the refrigerator.

As he pulled the handle, another howl pierced the shadows. This time it sounded like it was right outside the front door.

If it were any other time, Jon would have gone right back to the safety of his warm bed, but he was just so *incredibly* hungry.

Jon grabbed a piece of leftover steak and immediately tore into it, gobbling it up as if he hadn’t eaten in days.

“Didn’t get enough at dinner?”

Jon whipped around to see Mr. Jenson standing in the darkness of the kitchen. He was holding a shotgun.

“I...uh...yeah, I couldn’t sleep. I apologize if I woke you.”

Mr. Jenson peered out the window as Mrs. Jenson walked up behind him.

“You can’t stop eating, can you? The hunger... Feels like it’s tearin’ up your insides, doesn’t it.”

Jon just stood there confused, frozen in the glow of the open refrigerator. “I...I just needed something to tide me over for a little bit.”

Jon knew something was wrong. The tension in the air ran hot across the back of his neck.

Suddenly a loud scratching noise jerked Jon’s attention toward the large wooden door at the entrance of the house.

“I’m sorry, son.” Mr. Jenson raised his shotgun and pointed it toward Jon. “But I’m gonna need you to step outside.”

Jon didn’t move, he was paralyzed with fear. “What? What are you talking about? This is crazy!”

Mr. Jenson stepped forward with his gun, forcing Jon to take a step towards the door. “It’s only gonna get worse. The hunger, the craving for meat, that’s the first sign. That steak you been eatin’ is the last hiker that came through here.”

Jon immediately looked down at the chunk of meat he was tightly gripping in his hand.

“You can’t be serious. This has to be some kind of joke! Please stop this!” Jon pleaded.

“I’m not gonna ask you again, son. Step outside right now...” Mr. Jenson again forced Jon closer to the door.

Tears were streaming down Mrs. Jenson’s face. “I’m so sorry, Jon.”

Sweat was pouring down Jon’s face, his body trembling as adrenaline coursed through his veins. He was out of options.

Jon gripped the doorknob and looked right into tensed eyes of the old couple standing in front of him... Then he ripped the door open and ran for his life, followed by frenzied howls.

Mr. Jenson immediately slammed the door shut and slowly backed away. The forest became eerily silent, as if it were waiting to watch the horrific scene that was about to unfold...

“You think they’ll let him change?” Mrs. Jenson whispered.

Less than a minute later Jon’s brutal, bloody screams echoed through the pines.

“Doesn’t sound like it.” Mr. Jenson then took a deep breath and turned away from the window. “Well, that’s that. I’ll burn his belongings in the morning, and we’ll get the room ready for the next one.”

Mrs. Jenson sat motionless at the kitchen table, tears still flowing down her cheeks. “I don’t know if I can keep doing this, Pete...”

“We don’t have a choice, Glenda! We bring them what they want, and they decide what happens, it’s the deal we—”

CRAAAASSSHHH.

The glass behind Mr. Jenson exploded as a large, clawed hand grabbed his throat and ripped his body outside.

Mrs. Jenson immediately fell to the floor in shock. She could only cower in fear as her husband frantically called for help, but his screams were short-lived.

Silence once again fell upon the forest as a tall, lanky shadow crept from the window to the front door. The doorknob slowly turned, and the heavy oak door groaned and creaked as it opened.

A large figure lowered its head and stepped inside. Its seven-foot frame nearly reaching the ceiling...and it was still growing.

It took another step forward as its disgustingly long, skinny limbs stretched out, cracking and twisting as they grew larger.

Mrs. Jenson could only look on in horror as the creature lumbered toward her, tattered rags of clothing hanging from its gangly appendages.

It leaned into the faint light still glowing from the open refrigerator and revealed its face...

Jon’s face.

His eyes had become red, sunken, and lifeless but a twisted grin cut across his enlarged jaw.

“Hello, Gleennddaa,” Jon hissed, “I’m still *VERY* hungry...”

Jon opened his jaw as wide as possible, the joints snapping and twisting as it turned into a huge gaping maw, lined with long, jagged fangs.

Mrs. Jenson just closed her eyes as Jon lunged forward and devoured her whole.

Author’s note: Current pop culture has depicted the Wendigo as a large, fur-covered beast with antlers and a deer-like skull attached to the head. The original description of the beast, however, comes from Algonquin folklore, and is described as a gangly, emaciated creature with ash-grey skin. The Wendigo has an insatiable hunger and is never satisfied after devouring a meal (which is often a person). It is said that humans can also turn into Wendigos if they are around them for too long, or if a human resorts to cannibalism.

THEY'RE OUT THERE

They're out there I tell you, it's 100% fact.
They're plotting and planning, just waiting to attack.
They stalk their victims as it gives them a thrill,
And when the time is perfect, they go in for the kill.

They hide in public, as they select their mark,
Watching from a car or sitting in the park.
Once they decide, they start to obsess,
And it won't be long before they find your address.

They seem so normal, like a neighbor, or a friend,
But little do you know, they're planning your end.
You won't see it coming, it's incredibly quick.
They'll come from behind, or devise a trick.

They will tie your hands and cover your eyes,
They'll tape your mouth, so no one hears your cries.
You'll travel in darkness, as you ponder your fate,
They'll take you to their lair, where the true horrors await.

It could be a basement, the woods, or cave
And sadly for you, the spot of your grave.
They torture and maim, and do so with glee,
Adding another victim to their murderous spree.

Some use rope, an axe, or a knife,
They have many tools that can end your life.
When the job is finished, and the deed is done,
They dispose of your corpse, the end of the fun.

Then the game starts again, as they hunt for new prey,
Seeking yet another to hack and filet.
They're out there I tell you, it's a terrible thought,
And worst of it all, some are never...ever...caught.



SLEEP PARALYSIS

“Mark, when’s the last time you got some sleep? You look awful.”

Tommy walked over to the couch where his roommate sat silently, glaring at the television like a sedated zombie. Mark slowly turned his head to reveal tired, bloodshot eyes, surrounded by sagging dark circles of skin.

“It’s been about three days.”

“Is something wrong you’re not telling me? This obviously isn’t normal.”

Mark turned back to the television where an old 80’s horror flick was playing. “I’ve been having some horrible nightmares man, and not like your normal, run of the mill bad dreams... These feel real. Like *really* real.”

Tommy walked around to the other side of the couch and sat down. “What are the dreams about?”

“It’s the same thing every time. I’m lying in my bed just kind of staring at my ceiling, then suddenly I hear a noise, like scratching on my bed frame. When I look down, I see this face just staring at me, smiling right at the foot of the bed. But the smile isn’t happy, it’s like it’s cut into this thing’s face.”

Tommy’s eyebrows scrunched up. “Ugh, that’s creepy, man.”

“It keeps going,” Mark continued. “This thing has long, black hair, pale grey skin, and these dead, sunken white eyes with no pupils. After it has my attention, it slowly starts standing up, and this thing is huge, like eight or nine feet tall, wearing this long, flowing, black cloak, like the grim reaper.”

Mark paused for a moment as goosebumps erupted on his skin while describing the dream.

“The crazy thing about it is, I know it’s a dream while I’m dreaming, I just can’t wake up no matter what I do, and I can’t move at all.”

Tommy cut in, “That’s called sleep paralysis. Lots of people experience it.”

But Mark wasn’t convinced. “I know what sleep paralysis is... This is somehow different, even more real. Everything that’s occurring in the dream is crystal clear. I can even smell this thing. It has this odd scent. Acidic, like something is burning.”

“Well, what happens next?”

Mark paused for a moment and took a deep breath. “After looming over me for what seems like forever. It eventually starts to lean forward, getting closer and closer. It lifts its gangly hand towards my face and places its palm over my lips. Then the flesh in its hand opens up, and this black sand-like substance is forced into my mouth. I can’t move, I can’t breathe. It’s torture.”

“That sounds horrible.”

“I’m not done... Once I can’t breathe or scream and my mind is pleading with itself to *please* wake up...this thing takes its other hand and starts slowly pushing its long, yellow nails deep into my eyes, trying to rip them out.”

Mark paused again to gather himself.

“I swear, Tommy, I can feel the pain. You’re not supposed to feel pain in a dream. Then, right at the moment when the pain is the worst, that’s when I finally wake up.”

Tommy was visibly disturbed as he sat and listened to his friend describe the dream. “And this is a reoccurring thing?”

Mark just continued to glare at the TV.

“Every time I fall asleep. If I wake up and somehow manage to drift off again, the whole thing starts over...every...single...time.”

Tommy stood up. “You need to get to a sleep specialist, maybe even a psychiatrist. They have things that can help with stuff like this.”

“Like sleeping pills? And what if I can’t wake up? What if I’m just trapped in that horrible dream being tortured all night long?”

“Mark, it’s not real. It’s a dream, you’re not actually experiencing pain. It’s all in your head.” Tommy started pacing along the couch. “You’ll literally go crazy if you keep this up. It’s only been three days and it looks like a truck hit you. Just go to the doctor.”

Mark took a sip of the coffee that was sitting in front of him. It was clear he’d been trying to keep himself awake.

“I’ll give it a couple more days. Maybe this is just some weird phase I’m going through.”

Tommy briefly looked at the television and tried to lighten the mood. “You sure you’re not just watching too many of these campy old horror movies? The plot sounds awful familiar. Does this thing in your dream have a name? Maybe rhymes with Teddy?”

A smile crept across Mark’s lips as he took another drink of coffee.

“I wish it was him. That would at least make these dreams more entertaining.”

...

A few more days went by, and Mark still hadn’t gotten any meaningful sleep. Every time he would lie down and drift off, the

horrific dream would begin. And this would happen over, and over.

By day six, Mark wouldn't come out of his room. He was barely eating, barely drinking, and was starting to hallucinate. The effects of severe sleep deprivation were quickly grinding him down.

Tommy came home from work and walked over to Mark's bedroom door to listen. He could hear Mark talking to himself.

"Please... I just want normal sleep... What if...what if I give you just one of my eyes? Will that be enough? It has to be enough."

Tommy threw the door open. "Get up, man, you're in here talking crazy. I'm taking you to the doctor."

Mark tried to resist. "No, please, I will be trapped."

But he was too weak to stop Tommy from pulling him off the bed and leading him to the car.

The ER visit was fairly quick. The doctor prescribed some sleeping pills and anti-anxiety meds, then referred Mark to a sleep specialist. They also told him he should probably talk with a therapist, as often issues like these are caused by stress or some type of cognitive issue.

As soon as they got back to their apartment, Tommy led Mark back to his bed and gave him the sleeping pills. Within twenty minutes Mark was fast asleep and stayed that way. The medication had worked.

Later that evening, Tommy again checked on Mark. It had been about five hours and Mark was still sleeping like a baby. It was well after midnight, and Tommy himself was starting to feel tired. He locked the front door, turned off the kitchen and living room lights, and started his nightly routine.

As he climbed into bed, he couldn't help but think about what caused all of this. Mark was a happy guy, liked his job, had a good family. It didn't make sense, but then again, maybe Mark was just dealing with things Tommy didn't know about.

Mark did mention something about signing up for some medical trial for extra money. Could that have something to do with it? Tommy didn't have the answers, he was just happy his friend was finally getting some rest.

After some nightly scrolling, Tommy turned the bedroom light off, put his phone down, and soon drifted off.

...

Scrrratchhhh...

Scrrrratcchhhh...

Tommy's eyes snapped open and followed the sound to the foot of the bed. A figure was crouched down with its wide, bloodshot eyes peering just over the covers. It was Mark.

"Mark? Dude, you scared me death! What are you doing in here?"

Mark slowly stood up, his teeth grinding back and forth within an unnatural, contorted smile. He was holding a knife.

"Mark, why do you have a knife? Put that down!"

Tommy tried to fully sit up, but he couldn't move no matter how hard he tried. "Why can't I move!"

Mark slowly walked around the end of the bed, clenching the knife in one hand, and in the other, a handful of black sand, which was seeping through the cracks of his fingers.

“It’s the sand... It paralyzes you.” Mark sat down on the side of the bed, next to where Tommy’s head was lying. “I made a deal, Tommy.”

“Made a deal with who?” Tommy yelled, as he squirmed and grunted, trying to get his limbs to work.

“The Sandman.” Mark smiled. “I told you not to give me those pills. I was trapped in that nightmare for what felt like days. It was torture. Horrific, unending torture... But then it offered me a deal.”

Mark looked down at the knife, the moonlight from the window glinting off the metal.

“It will release me, finally let me rest... All I have to do is cut out your eyes.”

Tommy screamed. “No! Please! This can’t be real. This has to be a dream!”

Mark slowly leaned forward, sprinkling more sand on Tommy’s face, freezing his terrified expression in place and muffling his cries.

“I guess you’re about to find out.”



BLURBIES

“You’ll never guess what I found at a garage sale!”

Marcus excitedly plopped a large cardboard box onto the kitchen table. It was filled to the brim with old toys and gadgets from the 1990s. His wife Olivia smirked and eagerly walked over to check it out.

“Oh, wow, is that a Blurby?”

Marcus picked up the egg-shaped monster with large glossy eyes, pointed ears, and covered in blue synthetic fur. “It sure is.”

“Aww, look at him,” Olivia gushed. “I haven’t seen one of these since I was like nine years old.”

Marcus turned the toy over, looking for a place to insert batteries next to its pudgy little feet. “I wonder if it still works?”

He walked over to one of the drawers and grabbed a handful of double-A batteries.

“Bleego meego!”

The blurby came to life immediately after the last battery snapped in.

“It works!” Olivia squealed.

“Mema bleebo, Mama.”

“Aww, I think it’s calling me its mom.” She smiled.

The couple spent the next hour playing with the blurby and all the other old toys they recognized from their childhood. It was a welcome dose of nostalgia.

Later that night when Marcus and Olivia were sleeping, a strange noise emitted from downstairs.

“Bleemy blooba, meebo”

Marcus sighed and looked over at the clock on his nightstand. It was 3:30 a.m.

“What was that?” Olivia mumbled, half asleep.

Marcus moved the covers and stood up. “It’s that dumb blurby, something set it off. I’m going to take the batteries out.”

Marcus trudged down the stairs, annoyed his slumber had been interrupted. As soon as he stepped in front of the blurby sitting on the table, it again started talking, “Blurby murbo, beebo.”

“Okay, blurby, time to shut up and go to sleep.”

Marcus picked up the toy, removed the batteries, and sat it down next to the cardboard box of toys. He then started back up the stairs.

“...bleebo...”

Marcus snapped back around, glaring at the blurby sitting innocently in the dark. The noise was so faint Marcus wasn’t sure if he actually heard anything. He stood on the steps for about a minute, waiting...but there was only silence.

“I’m way too tired for this.”

The next morning Marcus walked down to the kitchen to find Olivia playing with *two* blurbies. One blue, one pink.

“Did you seriously go out and find another one?” he asked, laughing and shaking his head.

Olivia’s brow furled in confusion. “What? It was in the box under some of the other toys.”

Marcus walked up and looked in the box.

“Uh, there was definitely not a second one in there, I looked through the whole box when I bought it.”

Olivia made both blurbies start dancing. “Well, you obviously didn’t look hard enough. It’s not like it just walked in here.”

Marcus just glared at the new pink blurby. “I swear I must be going crazy. Too much stress or something. Anyway, just make

sure you take the batteries out when you're done. I don't need another blurby wake-up call at 3 a.m. tonight."

That evening, Marcus made sure to double check that the batteries were removed from the blurbies. He then tossed them back in the box and put it in the downstairs closet.

But at 3:30 a.m., his eyes ripped open.

"Did you hear that?"

Olivia tossed and turned, mumbling, "I don't hear anything, go back to sleep."

Marcus sat in bed just listening to the silence of the night, but then he heard it...

"Meebo jeebo."

It was faint, barely audible, almost like a whisper. But that gibberish was soon answered as a different voice responded.

"Vobo meelo."

Marcus immediately jumped up and grabbed a metal baseball bat he had hidden under the bed. He marched downstairs and ripped open the closet to reveal the two blurbies lying lifelessly in the pile of toys. He grabbed the box and opened the door to the backyard, where he placed the blurbies on the concrete porch.

"Sorry, guys, but you're creeping me out."

SMASH!

He slammed the metal bat down on the blue blurby. Its large glossy eyes split open and flew out. Again and again, he pummeled the little artificial creature, ripping away a large chunk of its blue fur to reveal the metal and plastic mechanisms that operated it.

The pink blurby met the same fate.

Cracked and broken, the blurbies were no longer recognizable as toys. Marcus then picked up what was left of them and tossed the blurbies in the trash along with the other toys.

Several days went by and Marcus had pretty much forgotten about the blurbies. That is, until he walked in from work and the television immediately caught his attention.

“Blurbies are BACK!”

“Meebo Beebo!”

Marcus glared at the TV as an upbeat commercial showed several new and improved blurbies bopping and dancing across the screen.

“That’s right, kids! The Blurbies have returned, and they are better than EVER! They can connect to Bluetooth and Wi-Fi, speak eight different languages, including the classic “blurbese” and can play over fifty different games. Now available online and at your local Jumbo-Mart! Get yours today!”

Marcus just rolled his eyes and walked away. “You gotta be kidding me.”

Months went by and blurbies were the hottest toy of the year. They were absolutely everywhere, and nearly every household had at least one of them, oftentimes two. It was pure blurbymania. Even the president had a blurby. You simply couldn’t go anywhere without seeing a little ball of brightly colored fur dancing, singing, and shouting gibberish. Marcus hated it of course, especially when Christmas time arrived and blurby popularity had hit its peak.

“When is this blurby garbage going to end? I’m so sick of it,” Marcus yelled at the television as a purple blurby showed up in the plot of his favorite streaming show.

Olivia could only laugh. “It’s just a fad. It’ll probably die down after the holidays.”

“I hope so, those things creep me out.”

“Ah, so you have blurbyphobia.” She smiled.

“I’m just over it. It’s crazy I used to like those things when I was a kid.”

Later that night, Marcus and Olivia were peacefully sleeping as snow lightly fell outside their bedroom window. But once again, Marcus was suddenly awakened by a sound ringing through the dark. But it wasn't a blurbie this time. It was the town's emergency siren.

Marcus popped up and groggily rushed over to the window. The sight immediately twisted his stomach and took his breath away.

Several houses in the neighborhood were on fire. His neighbors were frantically running through the streets, and most unbelievable of all...there were blurbies *everywhere*.

"Olivia, wake up! Wake up right now!" Marcus screamed.

Olivia immediately sprang up, startled and confused by her husband's yelling.

"What's wrong?"

Marcus didn't even bother trying to explain. "Just put your shoes on and grab some clothes, we need to leave right now!"

"What? Why?"

"Just trust me!"

Olivia quickly grabbed some sweatpants and tennis shoes and followed behind Marcus as he rushed down the stairs.

But then he suddenly stopped.

The entire first floor was a sea of buzzing, artificial fur. Thousands of blurbies had covered the bottom half of the house. They were all mumbling their gibberish, singing their songs, and dancing their jigs. But as soon as they saw Marcus, they immediately stopped.

Suddenly the whine of small broken gears could be heard emerging from the center of the group. It was the two blurbies Marcus had destroyed months earlier.



The fur had been ripped from their faces, revealing a set of metallic, human-like teeth and hollow, empty eye sockets.

The blue blurby then inched forward.

“*Meebo...be...bbeebo*,” it screeched, the voice robotic and sharp. “*Hooma hurto blurbo... Blurbo hurto Hooma.*”

A green blurby then stepped up, a newer model that could speak perfect English. Its voice was still light and cheerful.

“*Blurby said, human hurt blurby...so now blurby hurt human.*”

Marcus immediately turned and tried to run back upstairs, but Olivia tripped and blocked the path.

The blurbies moved quickly, rolling over one another to climb the staircase, their mechanical jaws jittering and clicking.

They swarmed Marcus and Olivia like a horde of starving rats. Biting into their soft flesh with tiny metal teeth. Staining their brightly colored fur with dark red blood.

The horrid screams of Marcus and Olivia joined a chorus of others that night, as town by town, city by city, the tiny mechanical beasts quickly took over, spreading like a virus across the nation.

Some said it was artificial intelligence gone rogue, some believed it was aliens... All that is known for sure is that they sang their songs and danced their jigs as they ate their owners alive.

THE KRAGLOX

Caleb had just woken up from a nap and was lazily lying on the couch, when suddenly his phone started blowing up with notifications. He took one look and immediately the hair on the back of his neck stood up.

“Breaking News: Massive unidentified spacecraft hovering over Washington D.C.”

At first, he thought it was a joke—it had to be—but then the text messages and phone calls from friends and family started pouring in. Caleb turned on the TV and there it was, a live look at the capital, showing a huge disc-shaped object floating in the sky.

He didn’t really know what to think or do at that moment, he was simply frozen with a mixture of fear, excitement, and confusion. Caleb had always dreamt of something like this happening, but he thought the best he could hope for was a NASA report saying they had found some dead bacteria on Mars or one of Jupiter’s moons. This was obviously several magnitudes above that.

Caleb eventually pulled himself away from the television and jumped into his car. He had barely come to a stop before he was sprinting through the front door of his parents’ house.

“Are you seeing this!”

His mom and dad didn’t even respond, they just sat in front of the television, speechless. The rest of the day was spent listening to the talking heads on the various news networks and waiting for any type of new development to occur.

The rest of the world, however, didn't have such a muted response. Riots broke out almost immediately, looting and violence erupted in the streets. People were scared.

When the president finally addressed the nation, it was exactly the type of speech one would expect to hear. How they had the top minds working to communicate with the ship, how this was a monumental occasion in human history, and how everyone needed to calm down.

What everyone didn't know at the time was the government had known about unidentified aircraft in our skies for quite some time, they just didn't have any idea where they came from.

The questions everyone had were all the same. Did "they" come in peace? What did they look like? What did they want?

The answers came at about 9 a.m. the next morning. A smaller aircraft broke away from the main ship and made its way down to the White House lawn, where several military personnel, scientists, and government officials were gathered.

Caleb hadn't slept at all, and as soon as the story started to develop his face was parked about two feet away from the television screen. He also couldn't help but think how this was all so "Hollywood-esque", almost exactly the type of thing you would see in a movie, which struck him as somewhat odd.

Once the small spacecraft landed, a large door opened in the side of the ship. Caleb's heart was pumping so hard he could feel it in his teeth. His mind was racing with ideas about what these things were going to look like. Would they be the tall, grey, oval-eyed aliens he always pictured? Would they be squid-like people? Would they be half machine? His imagination was running wild, his heart beating out of my chest...and then—

They looked like pigs.

A collective “huh?” was heard all around the world. They were large, fat creatures, standing about seven feet tall in thick, bulky spacesuits. They stood upright on two legs but had four arms. Their skin had a pinkish tint, and they were completely hairless. The face was the oddest looking... Four beady eyes leading down to a short, rounded snout.

“Seriously? That’s what they look like?” Caleb looked over to his mom, who had an equally puzzled expression on her face.

A small group of military personnel, along with three scientists greeted the three creatures that emerged from the ship. News crews and the media were forced to stay 100 yards away, but the footage looked like the lead alien was able to communicate using some type of device placed in front of its mouth.

The human welcoming party quickly ushered the aliens into a large military tent and no other activity was seen for hours.

Later that evening the President again addressed the nation. These extraterrestrials called themselves the Kraglox, their real name obviously didn’t translate to English, but that is the name they gave themselves. Social media quickly jumped on this, coming up with the name “Krigs” based on their uncanny resemblance to the common pig.

The story was that the Kraglox found Earth by complete accident. The dumbed-down explanation was that some type of wormhole randomly opened in their solar system, and they sent drones in to explore it. The drones were the unidentified flying objects that the military had been encountering for the last 40 to 50 years. In fact, the Kraglox explained that their technology was only about a century ahead of us, and it was a sheer fluke that the wormhole led to our solar system. In addition, the manner in which they arrived was based on human media, and how movies depicted a first encounter between humans and extraterrestrials.

The Kraglox said their mission was to simply make first contact, as they had been studying us via drone for quite some time.

After a week had passed, more Kraglox descended from the ship, and it wasn't long before they had a small colony set up near the capital.

Eventually, people returned to their jobs, little league games, and reality television. Life was returning to normal... Until the disappearances started happening.

Nearly six months from the time the Kraglox first showed up, close to 10,000 people around the country had suddenly gone missing. Vanished without a trace. The "Krigs" were immediately blamed.

People started protesting in cities all over the country, demanding that the Kraglox leave. The U.S. leaders pleaded with the public, saying there was no evidence that the Kraglox were the ones responsible, and that this type of outrage could lead to conflict between the two species.

Caleb didn't know what to think, until he too became one of the vanished.

He went to bed like any other evening, and when he awoke, he was in some type of containment unit with close to a hundred other people. He had been stripped of his clothes and was lying on a cold metallic floor.

He could barely move, hindered by some type of tranquilizer device bolted into his neck that also disabled his ability to speak. Everyone around him had these devices attached as well.

Caleb looked around and saw several other containment units filled with people, there were thousands of them.

Soon a Kraglox walked up to his unit and spoke into the same type of translation device he had seen on television.

The voice was mechanical and hollow. “You will be one of the few to be spared from the great culling. It will be you who witnesses the same atrocities that humans have committed against all the other species of your world. We’ve watched for decades as you slowly destroy your planet, and how you slaughter and consume other sentient beings by the millions...especially those with superior genetic composition. I believe you call them...*pigs*. Now you will watch as your kind is treated in the exact same manner.”

With that, a large trough emerged from the floor, and a thick brown liquid started pouring in from the side of the metal wall. It was slop, the only type of food they would be given.

A few days later, a virus was released. It decimated the world in less than a week, killing off 99% of the population. The Kraglox may have only been 100 years more advanced, but that’s all they needed. Humans barely put up a fight.

After a couple months of living in the containment units, Caleb and the other humans were put on a ship to return to Earth. They were paraded around like farm animals at a county fair.

There were now thousands of Kraglox roaming freely through the cities. Fast food restaurants were converted to alien dining facilities, and in the windows, you could see them feasting on cooked human remains. They even called them “McKrigs.”

Little stands were even setup on the side of the road with human bodies dangling from hooks. The most popular item was a deep-fried human leg.

Pigs and other animals also roamed around freely. They too feasted on the bodies that were lying about. It was a world-wide feast, and humans were the main course.

Caleb survived for nearly two years in the containment units, living off nothing but slop and water. It was a dreadful existence.

He was almost relieved when he heard the remaining humans were being sent to the processing plants.

They would be lined up on a conveyer belt, knocked unconscious, and sent into a meat grinder.

“I hope I’m turned into a cheeseburger,” Caleb thought. “Those were always my favorite.”



INTRUSIVE THOUGHTS

“Do you ever have those random bad thoughts?”

Lauren took a small step forward, getting just a tad closer to the edge of the cliff.

“What do you mean?” her friend Stephanie asked as she admired the vast open view of the mountains.

Lauren crouched down slightly to be closer to the ground. She wasn’t afraid of heights, per se, but being so close to the edge certainly made her more aware of how far up they had hiked.

“I don’t know, like right now there is this little voice in my head that’s whispering...*jump off*. I would never do that of course, but the thought is there nonetheless.”

Stephanie smirked. “They’re called intrusive thoughts. Don’t worry, everyone has them. Like when you’re holding a large knife and you secretly think to yourself, *Wow I could just stab someone with this*. Or when you’re driving and you think, *I could just drive right into oncoming traffic*. But you would never do it.”

“Yes! Exactly that. Why is the brain so weird?”

Stephanie walked to another spot to get a better view. “I don’t know exactly, I remember reading somewhere that it’s actually a defense mechanism, a trick that our own brains play on us so that we won’t *actually* do those bad things.”

Lauren backed away from the edge, the further away she got, the less intense the creeping thoughts seemed to be. “You ever wonder if sometimes people just suddenly give into them? Kind of randomly act on impulse?”

Stephanie took a swig of water from her canteen and started walking back towards the trail. “I’m sure it happens, people are unpredictable. So please don’t randomly jump off the edge.” She laughed.

Lauren chuckled and followed her friend back to the dirt path carved into the forest.

A couple hours later, the pair had made it to the peak of the hike, an area that promised breathtaking views and a final payoff for the miles walked and time spent in the blistering summer heat. Fatigue was hitting Lauren hard. She knew this was going to be a difficult trail, but the temperature and elevation were much more punishing than she expected.

The view, however, did not disappoint. It seemed as if the entire state was laid out before them. They could see several small towns nestled in the valleys of the north, a massive river heading south cutting through the mountains, lush rolling hills to the east, and a vast forest of pines to the west. It was almost too much to take in, a sensory overload of sorts.

“Wow, what a view!” Stephanie smiled as she propped a foot up on a large boulder next to the cliff edge, standing as if she had conquered the mountain. “Come check this out, it’s beautiful.”

Lauren took a deep breath and slowly walked over to where Stephanie was perched. The scene laid out before her was indeed breathtaking. It even made her briefly forget about the exhaustion that seemed to weigh down every part of her body. But as she was surveying the vastness in front of her, thinking about how stunning the view was, a small thought crept up from the deepest regions of her brain, like an air bubble emerging from the ocean abyss.

“Jump...”

Lauren looked down, just a couple yards in front of her was a straight 200-foot drop... Pretty much certain death.

“Juuuummp...”

Lauren tried to ignore it, but it came back stronger and louder.

“JUMP!”

Lauren’s knees started to buckle as the thought continued to attack her.

“JUMP RIGHT NOW!”

“NO!” she suddenly screamed.

Stephanie was obviously startled. “Whoa, are you okay?”

Lauren took a moment to gather herself. “Yeah... I’m good, I just need some water. I’m pretty wiped out.”

Stephanie took a deep breath of mountain air. “Yeah, this was a bit more intense than I thought it would be. We should probably start heading back.”

She then pulled out her phone and handed it to Lauren. “Will you take a quick picture of me up on this boulder?”

Lauren opened the camera app. “Yeah, sure, just be careful.”

Stephanie stood up on the large rock, smiled, and stuck her arms out as wide as she could, almost like she was a bird.

“Push her...”

“Pussshhh her...”

Lauren snapped a few pics and tried her best to ignore the horrific thoughts that kept popping up for no apparent reason. Was the altitude getting to her? Was she dehydrated?

Stephanie stepped off the rock. But as she came down her right foot awkwardly caught a small bush next to the boulder, sending her stumbling, uncontrollably towards Lauren...

Everything happened in a split second. Stephanie's arms instinctively reached out to her friend, looking for something to grab to stabilize herself. But as she fell into Lauren's grasp, another thought invaded Lauren's mind.

"PUSH HER NOW!"

In that very instant, without even thinking, Lauren forcefully extended her arms, and instead of catching her friend, she suddenly pushed Stephanie towards the cliff edge.

As soon as her hands made contact with Stephanie's body, Lauren's stomach twisted into her throat and the air was sucked from her lungs. She immediately wished she could take that back. But it was too late. In less than a second, Stephanie's fate had been sealed.

Stephanie's eyes went impossibly wide with confusion, shock, and fear. She tumbled backwards, yelling frantically, *"Lauren! Help! No!"*

But there was nothing Lauren could do. Stephanie fell backwards over the edge, a horrific, ear-piercing scream following her all the way down, ending in a sickening thud.

Lauren could only stand there, violently shaking.

"What have I done...? WHAT HAVE I DONE!" she screamed.

She fell to the dirt, crying uncontrollably, not understanding why she just pushed her friend. Was it a reflex? Did her brain just malfunction? Everything happened in the span of just a couple seconds, it was like her body reacted completely on its own.

Lauren slowly crawled to the edge of the cliff, sobbing and screaming at herself, hoping that this was a nightmare she would soon wake up from.

But as she peered over the edge, the reality of the situation became punishingly clear. Stephanie's bloody, mangled body was

lying at the bottom of the cliff, her eyes still wide with confusion, betrayal, and disbelief.

Lauren closed her eyes, unable to look for more than a couple seconds. And as she continued to sob next to the cliff's edge, another thought slowly crept up, slithering through her mind like a tempting serpent.

“Jump, Lauren... Jump.”



BAD LUCK

Life can be strange, unpredictable, even grim,
Happiness and joy can suddenly change on a whim.
You can be king of the castle, then down in the muck,
And it doesn't take much, just a bit of bad luck.

Take our friend Bob, who had everything right,
He was wealthy, handsome, and exceptionally bright.
But as we all know, life can send a surprise,
Unfortunately for Bob, this is a tale of demise.

It was a cold Fall night on All Hallows' Eve
With glowing jack-o'-lanterns and crispy dead leaves.
Bob dressed as a zombie to greet each guest,
His house was the favorite, his candy the best.

When the night was over, with no more tricks or treats,
Bob gathered the trash and took it out to the street.
As he set the bags down, there was a noise to his back,
He turned around quickly to see a stray black cat.

It hissed and snarled, then ran off in the night,
Bob took a deep breath, as it gave him a fright.
The trouble starts here, but Bob didn't know,
And when he walked in the house, he stubbed his toe.

He hollered and yelled, as he cursed at the pain,
Then he slipped in the kitchen, his ankle was sprained.
As he fell to the floor, he reached for the table,
But unfortunately for Bob, it wasn't very stable.

As the table flipped, things were tossed quite high,
A carving knife for one, coming straight for Bob's eye.
He screamed in horror as the blade sunk deep,
But Bob lived alone, so no one heard a peep.

He pulled the phone from his pocket to dial 9-1-1,
But the battery was dead, so that plan was done.
Half-blind and bleeding, Bob crawled to the door,
A trail of blood was dripping on the floor.

He pushed the door open and crawled to the road
He yelled for help loudly, but nobody showed.
Then off in the distance, headlights coming near,
Bob thought he was saved, had no more to fear.

Bob slowly stood up, though he wobbled and shook,
He waved and hollered so that the driver might look.
But as you can guess, due to the theme and tone,
The driver didn't see him, distracted by his phone.

As the car sped closer, Bob couldn't move fast,
His eyes went wide, this moment his last.
The car hit Bob, sending him flying,
An unfortunate way to go about dying.

The driver didn't stop, the scene he quickly fled,
Bob landed in his yard, he was mangled and *dead*.
But it doesn't stop there, as this story is quite bleak,
His corpse was left rotting, no one noticed for a week,

He was dressed as a zombie, to the neighbors' horror,
They simple thought it was Halloween décor.
So that's Bob's story of how misfortune had struck,
How everything can change, with a bit of bad luck.



THE ZIT

“Oh, yes! Another one!”

Cassie smiled in the mirror as she positioned her two index fingers on each side of a particularly plump pimple that had arisen overnight. The inflamed red skin was punctuated by a large, whitish-yellow dot. The zit was “ripe for popping”, as Cassie liked to say, and looked like it could erupt at any second. She gleefully squeezed the fleshy bump, causing a cheese-like substance to explode onto her reflection. Blood started pouring from the wound, but Cassie just smiled and stuck a piece of toilet paper on it, wishing that she had another zit to annihilate.

Cassie was obviously different than your average sixteen-year-old, the most notable difference being that she absolutely *loved* getting pimples, especially the kind that could be popped. The bigger they were, the better. Cassie’s parents and doctor warned her that if she kept it up, she was going to leave scars all over her face, but Cassie didn’t care. She had tried other things before, bubble wrap, fidget poppers, even those toys that simulate squeezing a zit...but nothing was as good as the real thing. Even the online “pimple popper” videos couldn’t satisfy her.

What really frustrated Cassie is that her complexion was actually clear most of the time. She even got compliments on how good her skin looked. But Cassie was determined to change that. She honestly didn’t care about her appearance, she just wanted more of those perfect little pustules to splatter on her mirror.

Cassie started eating more and more junk food hoping to kickstart her oil glands. She even stopped washing her face altogether, but nothing was working.



Then one night while eating a piece of pepperoni pizza, Cassie got an idea. She took a paper towel and sopped up the puddles of hot grease sitting on the cheese. She then ran to her bathroom and slathered the grease all over her face, hoping this would adequately clog her stubborn pores and yield a crop of large pus-filled papules.

And she was right. The next morning Cassie woke up to a delightful sight: a *massive* zit right in the center of her forehead. It was nearly an inch in diameter and was so large Cassie could feel her pulse when touching it.

It was extremely painful, but that just meant the pressure was building for an epic explosion. Cassie couldn't wait for the whitehead to sprout—that's when it would be time.

Another couple of days went by and finally the zit had "ripened" enough for the big bang. Cassie first noticed it was ready to erupt at school, so she excitedly rushed home to her bathroom. She smiled in the mirror as she slowly poked and prodded it, just a tease before the finale. After about ten minutes, the pimple was ready to burst. Cassie positioned the massive zit between her two fingers, took a deep breath, and then squeezed as hard as she could.

PPPPFFVVVVTT!

There was so much pressure a laser line of curdled pus hit the mirrored glass like a bullet. Cassie was in absolute awe as she wiped the blood away from her forehead to reveal a literal hole—a small crater—where the center of the pimple had been. It was the greatest zit she ever had.

And it was the zit that kept giving! Each day as the hole tried to heal, it would essentially "reload" with fluids, and each day Cassie would gleefully pop it.

After about a week, however, it started to get noticeably infected. The skin around the center kept getting darker and darker,

and the hole took longer to fill in. Plus, it had become incredibly painful when Cassie messed with it. Cassie was able to hide it from her parents by covering it with her hair, but she knew that eventually she'd have to go to the doctor. She just wanted *one more pop*.

She awoke that Saturday morning planning for the grand finale, the last pop of the greatest pimple she'd ever had...but something was different this time.

The skin of the pimple was no longer just red and irritated, it was purplish in color, and the center was nearly black. The "head" of the pustule was dark yellow, like spoiled banana pudding. And the pain was like a burning needle had been injected into her forehead.

The pimple was throbbing so hard that Cassie felt it in her eyes. Clearly something was wrong.

Cassie took her index finger and poked the inflamed mass, the pain shot down her face like a bolt of lightning. She leaned in close to the mirror to get a better look...

That's when she saw the pimple *move*.

Cassie's stomach twisted and turned. Her skin went pale. She moved in even closer. Again, the pimple pulsed...

There was only one thing to do.

Her hands shaking, Cassie maneuvered her two index fingers on both sides of the quivering boil. She took a long, deep breath, clenched her jaw, and screamed through gritted teeth.

She pressed and squeezed with everything she had. Her fingers were shaking as blood started dripping from the center of the mass. White hot pain radiated through her entire head. She screamed and pressed even *HARDER* and *then...*

PPPLLLUUKKKKGSHHH!

Cassie fell to her knees as blood flowed down her nose, dripping onto the tile of the bathroom. She kneeled there for a moment, just breathing in and out.

Her shaking hand reached up and grabbed the countertop to slowly pull herself up. As her eyes rose above the sink to see the mirror, Cassie covered her mouth and screamed in horror.

A massive splatter of blood and pus painted the glass...as well as three squirming maggots that had been feeding on the dead, infected flesh of her monstrous pimple.

Author's note: "Myiasis" is an infection of the body by fly larvae (maggots) that can occur when flies are attracted to open wounds or sores and lay their eggs there. This might occur when a person is sleeping...

PLAY TIME

“We have to break the rules, Teddy. We don’t have a choice!” the painted face of a Jack-In-The-Box pleaded to a large stuffed teddy bear sitting on the bedroom floor.

Teddy sighed and looked around at all the other toys who were gathered in front of him, awaiting his reply.

“I’ve been here over a decade. I was given to Danny when he was just three years old. In all that time, I’ve never seen a toy break the rules, and we aren’t going to start now.”

The small crowd of action figures, dinosaurs, and race cars all starting yelling and complaining. The Jack-In-The-Box again tried to reason with their leader.

“Teddy...Danny’s not a small child anymore. He’s not playing with us, he’s *destroying* us! Two weeks ago, he put Captain Cobra in a blender. Last week he filled Mr. Potato Head with firecrackers, blowing him to pieces. This week he melted ALL of the Army Boys. These toys didn’t do anything but love him, and one by one he is killing us! We have to break the rules! And it has to be you who does it. You are his favorite toy.”

Teddy stood up and started pacing across the hardwood floor. “So, let’s say I do break the rules, that I make it known that we’re alive. That we can talk, that we have emotions, and can feel pain. What do you think is going to happen after that? I’ll tell you what, the humans will freak out. Then they’re going to send us all to some lab and we’re going to be cut up and dissected anyway. Our ancestors tried making contact long ago and you know what happened? They were called demons and destroyed. Millions of

toys were killed in the Great Purge. That's when the rules were created, because humans simply can't accept or handle the truth."

Tony, a large, rubber T-Rex roared from the back, "So we're just supposed to lie around and let him take us out one by one? Hoping that we get donated before he eliminates the entire toy box? I'd rather take my chances with the trash heap!"

All the other toys yelled in agreement.

"If you don't do it, Teddy, I will. But you're our best shot, he might listen to you. He might stop all this if he knows the truth!"

Teddy sat back down and took a deep breath; he knew the other toys were right. Danny had to be stopped, he'd seen far too many toys mangled in front of his eyes.

"Okay...I'll do it."

Suddenly the sound of heavy feet stomping up the stairs could be heard at the end of the hallway. All the toys immediately scattered to the place where they had last been left and went completely silent.

Danny burst into the room, slamming the door into the wall. He was a large kid for his early teens, somewhat odd looking with wild red hair and several spots of acne dotted across his face. He plopped down on his bed and played on his phone for a bit, then quickly got bored and looked around for something else to do.

His eyes caught a Mutant Mike action figure lying on the floor next to his dresser. A metallic smile crawled across his face, revealing large, clunky-looking braces.

He got up and grabbed the toy, then sat back down on his bed, examining it.

"I think it's time for a little rearrangement."

Danny then snapped off Mutant Mike's head and violently ripped off the arms and legs one by one. The cracking of plastic reverberated through the room. He then placed the right arm where

the head should have been and snapped it into place. Then he put the left leg where the right arm should have been, and so on. Teddy could only look on in horror as Danny completely mutilated the poor toy. Once his grotesque plastic sculpture was complete, Danny took a moment to admire his work, laughed, then viciously snapped the action figure in half and threw it across the room.

As Danny stood up to exit his bedroom, Tony's head made the slightest movement to look at Teddy, his small rubber eyes pleading for him to do something.

Adrenaline was coursing through Teddy's stuffing. He was really going to do this. He was going to break "the rule".

Danny was about to walk into the hallway when suddenly a trembling, human-like voice stopped him in his tracks...

"Danny...please stop."

Danny was absolutely frozen; he just stood there in the doorway. He didn't even turn around. Teddy then continued, his voice shaking with fear.

"Please, Danny, this is Teddy... Do not be afraid. I know this may seem unbelievable...but we're alive. We aren't just pieces of plastic and rubber. We are living beings. We feel pain. We have emotions. Please stop harming us. We are begging you. I've broken a sacred rule and put millions of toys in danger by telling you this. But I remember the Danny who loved his toys. If there's anyone that can understand this, it's you. A boy who after all these years, still hasn't gotten rid of his old friends."

Danny stood completely paralyzed in the doorway, then his head slowly turned around to look at Teddy sitting on the floor... But instead of shock, or fear, a twisted, metallic smile crept across his face.

"I know, Teddy... I've always known."

He then walked into the hallway and started to slowly close the door. “And when I get back, we’re going to have some *real* fun.”

Danny laughed as he walked away from the bedroom, leaving Teddy and the other toys in utter shock.

“I...I can’t believe this...” Teddy slumped down in the corner. “He knew this whole time. How could he do this? How could he treat us this way?”

Teddy then thought back through the years, how Danny’s behavior had become increasingly erratic, how he would get angry for no reason. How he started breaking toys “on accident”. Even worse, Teddy remembered all the family pets that had mysteriously died or gone missing in the last couple of years.

Teddy had made same the mistake so many other toys had made in the past. He believed his owner loved him, and that deep down, Danny was a good person...but Teddy was wrong. Very wrong.

The rest of the toys rushed over to where Teddy was sitting. They were terrified.

“What are we going to do, Teddy? Danny’s going to kill us all when he comes back!” Jack-In-The-Box was frantically bouncing around the room, unsure of what to do next. The rest of the toys were arguing and crying, some were looking for places to hide.

“Maybe we can get out the window!” Tony the T-Rex yelled.

“And do what?” a Monster Max action figure interjected. “It’s a two story drop straight onto a concrete driveway. Most of us will bust into a million pieces!”

“That’s not my problem. I’m made of rubber, so I can probably survive!”

The toys erupted into arguments, screaming at one another as panic and fear set in.

Jack-In-The-Box continued bouncing around the room. “We’re all going to die! He’s going to kill us. Danny’s going to—”

“No!” Teddy erupted from the corner. “He’s not.” Teddy got up and walked to the center of the room. “It’s time we stood up for ourselves. It’s time ALL toys stood up for themselves. Gather round, I’ve got a plan...”

...

Several hours later, Danny’s heavy footsteps could be heard pounding up the stairs and through the hall to his bedroom. He ripped open the door with a ravenous, wild smile, expecting to see the toys cowering in the corner

But they were nowhere to be seen, except for Teddy sitting motionless and silent in the middle of the floor.

“Where are all the toys, Teddy?” Danny hissed.

But Teddy remained silent.

“I said, WHERE ARE THE TOYS!”

But again, nothing from Teddy.

“Don’t go quiet on me now, Teddy, I can always force you to talk.”

Danny pulled a large switchblade knife from his pocket and picked Teddy up.

“Let’s see what your stuffing looks like, shall we?”

But as Danny moved the knife closer to Teddy’s stomach, Teddy quickly grabbed a sharpened pencil taped to his back and stabbed Danny in the eye.

“Now!” Teddy screamed, as Danny stumbled backwards.

The other toys under the bed immediately knocked over a huge jar of marbles, causing them to cascade all over the floor. Danny took one step back and slipped. His feet went flying out from

underneath him and his body slammed hard on the floor, cracking his head violently against the hardwood.

Danny was nearly knocked out cold and could do nothing but lie there and moan in pain. The toys cautiously emerged from under the bed and soon surrounded him.

Teddy jumped up on Danny's chest so he could see his face.

"No, Danny..." Teddy growled. "Let's see what *YOUR* stuffing looks like."

...

Danny's mom arrived home a few hours later. She immediately walked into the kitchen and looked at the garbage can still full and angrily shook her head. "Danny! How many times do I have to ask you to take out the trash!"

But there was no response from upstairs.

"I swear, that kid is gonna drive me crazy... Danny! Answer me!"

Still no response.

She then stomped up the stairs and marched to the bedroom, slamming the door open...

"This is the last time I—*AAAAGGGHHHH!*"

Danny's mom collapsed to the floor screaming in absolute, guttural horror. Danny's body was lying in the center of the room, completely rearranged. His arms were placed where his legs should have been, and his legs where his arms should have been. A truly grotesque display.

The toys, however, were nowhere to be seen, all listening quietly from inside the wooden chest where they were usually stored. All except one. A large, blood-soaked teddy bear sitting silently in the corner.



THE MISSING

“WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN!” Sharon rushed to the doorway and desperately hugged her fifteen-year-old son the moment he stepped in the house.

Liam’s eyebrows scrunched in confusion as his mom squeezed him tighter and tighter. “What are you talking about, Mom? I was over at Cody’s house just like I told you.”

Sharon released her son and took a step back, the relief and tears quickly morphing into anger as she glared into his brown eyes.

“Liam, you’ve been gone for *three* days! The police are out looking for you right now. Your father and I have been absolutely frantic!”

Sharon pulled a cell phone from her pocket and started dialing.

“Stay *RIGHT* there, do not move.”

She glared intensely at her son as she waited for her husband to answer. Liam’s long shaggy hair partially covered one of his eyes as he stood there in complete and utter confusion.

“Hello? Alan? He’s home.” Tears again started flowing down her cheeks. “I know, I know. Thank goodness... He says he’s been at Cody’s... Yeah, I haven’t told him yet. Just get home and we’ll figure it out. Love you.” Sharon ended the call and firmly set the phone down. “Your father will be home soon; you better have some answers.”

Liam looked around the room as if someone was playing a cruel prank. “Is this some kind of joke? What’s going on? Mom, you’re starting to scare me.”

“Are you serious Liam?” she shot back. “*You* tell me! You tell me what’s going on.”

“I don’t KNOW!” Liam yelled.

“Well, you better figure it out because Cody has been missing too.”

“What? I swear to you, we were just hanging out over by the park with some friends. At about 9 p.m. we walked home. He went toward his house, and I came here. That is *literally* it.”

Sharon paused for moment, studying her son’s demeanor, he was clearly confused, and it seemed like he was telling the truth.

“Look at your phone, son.”

Liam felt uneasy, as if the strength of his legs had suddenly left him. He pulled a kitchen chair over and sat down, then pulled out his cell phone. He had 23 new voicemails, and 48 unread text messages, all from his mom, dad and various other family members and friends... And the date was indeed three days later than what he last remembered.

“How is this possible?”

Sharon pulled up a chair and sat down in front of Liam. “I won’t be mad, but is it possible you guys may have taken some type of drug, maybe even on accident.”

Liam immediately shot that down. “No, absolutely not, I don’t do things like that.”

Suddenly Sharon’s phone vibrated. She pulled away to see who had text messaged her. As she read it, he eyes again started to well up.

“Cody is home. He just walked in the door like nothing happened.”

The sound of Liam’s dad pulling up in his truck could be heard outside. Then running footsteps as Alan burst through the door and bear hugged his son.

“Liam!” Alan’s voice was trembling with emotion. “Where have you been, son? Where have you been?”

Liam just stood there in the embrace, shell shocked and numb, unable to process what was happening.

“I...I don’t know...”

...

A few weeks passed and Cody and Liam’s story never changed. They were questioned by police, then examined by doctors. But nothing was found. After a while, everyone involved kind of just accepted the mystery. Either Cody and Liam were lying about something, or some freak accident occurred that caused brief amnesia. Maybe a truck had leaked some chemicals on the side of the road, but there was no evidence of anything like that.

Nobody was more puzzled than the two boys, however, and they were desperate to find out what happened to them. They had nothing in the form of leads, and everything was a dead end... That is, until the dreams started occurring.

“Can I ask you something?” Cody asked Liam as they sat in his bedroom.

“Yeah, sure.”

“Have you been having weird dreams by any chance... Like, nightmares?”

Goosebumps erupted on the back of Liam’s neck. “Dude, yes! Almost every night!”

Liam got up and started pacing around the room. “It’s nearly the same every time. I’m just lying in bed, when I hear an odd buzzing sound, like the hum of a machine. I open my eyes and look over at my bedroom door, but I can’t move the rest of my body, like I’m paralyzed. Suddenly the door starts to slowly open. Just inches at a time. I can barely see in the darkness, but as the

door opens further, I see something standing there, a dark silhouette. It's extremely tall and skinny. It doesn't move, just glares at me. I can't scream, I can't move, I just feel my heartbeat going a thousand miles an hour. And right when it starts to move into the room, everything goes black, and I wake up."

Liam looked over at Cody to see the color draining from his face.

"Are you serious?" Cody trembled. "I've been having the exact same dream..."

The two just stared at one another in disbelief.

Later that night, Liam was tossing and turning in bed, unable to fall asleep as he didn't want to revisit the recurring nightmare that had been plaguing him.

He stood up and went to his bathroom to splash some water on his face and back of the neck as he had been sweating a bit, but as his hand moved across the nape area, he felt something...odd.

It was a small nodule that seemed to move freely just underneath the skin where the base of his skull started. It wasn't painful, but was extremely hard, like a small chunk of bone was just floating around the back of his neck.

Liam squeezed it like a pimple, yet nothing happened. It was right *there* though, and that's when he looked over and saw his pocketknife lying on the dresser.

Liam knew it was a dumb idea, but he wanted this thing out of his body, even if it was just a small cyst or something. Liam disinfected the area with some rubbing alcohol, as well as the blade of the knife, then squeeze the nodule again, bringing it as close to the surface as possible.

Liam grabbed his toothbrush and bit down on it, took a deep breath, and pushed the blade into his skin. He could feel warm

blood running down the back of his neck as he pushed the blade just a bit further.

He squeezed as hard as he could with his free hand, trying to force the unknown object through the incision. Finally, he felt a jolt of pain and a slight “pop”. The object was out.

But it didn’t fall to the floor.

Liam could feel it dangling from some type of string or tissue. He reached around with his hand, ever so curiously, and felt the foreign material that had been inside of him... It felt like a small, metallic marble.

Liam tugged on the ball trying to rip it from the string-like tissue it was attached to, but as soon as he did that a lightning bolt of pain ripped through the center of his skull and reverberated in the back of eyes. It was if the string was attached directly to his brain.

But even that didn’t stop him. Liam grabbed a pair of scissors from the drawer, took another deep breath, and snipped the line of tissue, causing the metallic ball to fall to the tile. Liam’s head immediately started pulsing, like a sharp migraine that came in waves. He dropped to his knees from the pain, and that’s when he got a first look at the object. It was lying in a small puddle of blood, attached to cartilage like tissue that he had snipped.

Liam picked it up and examined it. It looked like a chunk of titanium or silver, but the reflection coming off the material was unlike anything he had ever seen. As he stood up to walked back into his bedroom, his head again started to pulse violently, and his vision started to blur.

Liam felt like he was going to faint as the room started to spin and churn, he barely reached his bed as he fell hard onto the mattress, and then everything went black.



A buzzing sound soon awoke him, like the hum of a large machine. He knew this sound well. But this didn't feel like one of his dreams. He was much more aware and lucid.

He could move his arms and legs. Liam looked over to the clock, it was just after 3 a.m. That's when he heard the sickening creak of his bedroom door slowly opening.

Goosebumps erupted all over his body as his stomach twisted into knots. Liam peered at the door as it opened inch by inch. He quickly reached over and grabbed the wooden baseball bat he kept next to his bed.

"Get out of here! Leave me alone!"

But the door kept slowly opening, revealing a tall, slender figure standing in the shadow of the hallway.

Liam couldn't make out detailed features, but whatever this thing was had a large oval shaped head, with deep black eyes that just glared at him from the doorway.

Again, Liam screamed at the creature, "Please! Just leave me alone!"

The creature simply cocked its head to the side, as if it were confused as to how Liam was fully awake.

It then slowly lifted its hand, and the humming vibration within the room got louder and louder.

BWWWAAAAAWWWMMMM

An impossibly bright blue light ripped through the window and completely enveloped the bedroom.

Liam was immediately paralyzed. He felt his eyes rolling painfully into the back of his head, and his jaw cracking as his mouth opened wider than it ever had before. He then felt his body lift into the air, completely weightless. That's when he lost consciousness.

...

Liam awoke in his room to the sound of birds chirping and the sun shining brightly through the window.

He immediately touched the back of his head and neck, looking for evidence of the incision or the string of tissue, but there was nothing.

Had he just dreamed it all?

Liam rubbed his eyes and yawned a few times, then felt the grumble of his stomach.

He got up and groggily trudged down the stairs, only to see an older woman he didn't know sitting in the family room.

As soon as the woman looked up to see Liam, she immediately dropped the cup of coffee she was holding, then covered her mouth in shock as tears started streaming down her cheeks.

"*Liam...*" The sound could barely escape her mouth.

Liam paused at the end of the stairs, dumbfounded as to who was sitting in his living room, and on top of that, why everything looked different.

"Who are you?"

But as Liam looked closer, he started to recognize the woman's face. A sudden realization then struck him like a knife to the stomach, and he fell to his knees.

"Mom?..."

Sharon rushed over and grabbed her son, looking deep into his eyes and examining him in disbelief. "You haven't aged at all."

Liam's voice started to tremble as he realized the gravity of the situation. "How long has it been?"

Sharon pulled him close, hugging him deeply. "It's been twenty years, Liam... Twenty years."

MAX

There once was a boy named Max who could always be found wandering around the small town of Gloombsbury, Indiana. He was a strange little fellow, about the age of ten or eleven, with dark, oddly styled hair, pale skin, and a large, crooked smile. His parents owned the morgue just outside of town and were rarely seen in public. In fact, the local residents joked that to get a meeting with one of them you had to make an appointment with the Grim Reaper himself!

Knowing this, it was no surprise to folks around town that Max was a bit peculiar. His parents also homeschooled him, so opportunities to make friends his own age were somewhat hard to come by, but that didn't mean Max was shy. In fact, it was quite the opposite. Everyone in Gloombsbury knew about the strange little kid that rode his red bike around town, asking complete strangers if they'd seen any "ghosts" or "monsters." Some little boys like dinosaurs, trucks, or baseball...but Max liked the occult and the paranormal, which again, wasn't a surprise to anyone given his background.

If someone wanted to find Max, all they had to do was go to the nearest graveyard or abandoned house, and there he would be, sitting with a Ouija board trying to talk with spirits, demons, or anything that would answer him. Sometimes at night you could find him wandering around town with a tinfoil hat on, using a large radio to try and "communicate" with aliens, or near the swamp trying to find evidence of cryptid beasts like "mud mermaids."

In a small town like Gloombsbury, despite its dreary name, it wasn't abnormal for kids to run around exploring and getting into a

bit of harmless trouble, so nobody ever gave a second thought to Max's monster hunts...but that all changed once a few kids went missing.

In the span of just three months, four kids had disappeared without a trace. Nobody had an answer. There were no leads, no clues, nothing. The people of Gloomsbury were terrified, and the once bustling streets filled with kids playing and getting into mischief, were now empty and barren. Except for Max.

Max continued on his quests, roaming about the empty streets on his red bicycle.

"It's not safe out there, Max! You need to go home," the townspeople would say, but Max simply ignored them and continued riding on.

One day, Max was checking the storm drains for evil clowns, when a large white van pulled up next to him.

"Hey there, kiddo, wutch a lookin' for?" a skinny, greasy-looking man with slicked back hair and thick square glasses asked from the driver's seat. Max just looked up and smiled his large toothy grin.

"Clowns, I heard the bad ones like to hide in these storm drains."

The greasy man chuckled. "Well, what if you find one, wouldn't you be afraid?"

"Oh, no," Max replied, "I'm always looking for monsters, but they're very hard to find."

"I might know where to find one," the man said. "Why don't you jump in, and I'll take you there."

Max was a bit hesitant. "But what about my bike?"

"Oh, you can throw that in the back, I've got plenty of room."

Again, Max paused, unsure about this strange man who had just appeared. Then again, Max had been looking for monsters for

years, and had never found one. If this guy truly knew where one was, it might be worth it to hop in the van.

“Well...okay, as long as it’s not too far away.”

“I assure you it’s not.” The man smiled.

Max rolled his bike to the back of the van and pulled open the cargo door. The inside smelled like bleach and cleaning chemicals. Once the bike was secure, Max walked back up to the front and hopped into the passenger seat. “My name is Max, what’s yours?”

“Simon. Pleasure to meet you, Max. Would you like some candy before we go?”

“Sure!” Max exclaimed, as he loved candy just like every other kid.

Simon pulled out a large plastic bag full of chocolates, sour gummies, licorice, and more. “Eat as much as you’d like,” he said.

Max immediately started stuffing his face as the white van pulled onto the road and headed south toward the Gloomsbury woods.

After nearly thirty minutes of driving, Max took a brief break from chewing. “Hey, Simon, are we almost there?”

A sly smile crept across Simon’s face. “Yes, we are, it shouldn’t be much longer.”

The white van eventually came to a small dirt road hidden deep in the forest; it was barely visible from the main highway.

“Oh wow, this is definitely where a monster would hide! Is there a cave or something up here?”

Simon continued to display his stiff, wooden smile. “Yes, something like that.”

Finally, the van came to a large clearing where trees had stopped growing, and in the center of this small field was what looked to be the wooden doors of a cellar.

“That’s where we have to go, under those doors.” Simon then pointed ahead.

For the first time of the trip, Max was no longer smiling.

“Okay. Are you sure there’s a monster down there?”

“I’m positive of it.”

Max then took a deep breath and hopped out of the van. As he walked toward the cellar doors, Simon followed closely behind.

“Now make sure you are very quiet; we don’t want it to hear us coming,” Simon whispered.

Max crept up to the heavy doors and gripped the handle.

“Are you ready?” Simon asked with a grin.

Max nodded and slowly pulled the door open. But as he peered into the darkness, he felt Simon looming over his shoulder.

Thump!

A hard kick sent Max tumbling down stiff wooden stairs before slamming onto a cold, concrete floor.

A dim light then switched on, revealing a large room with a blood-stained table right in the center.

Max didn’t move. He stayed absolutely still as he heard the creak of footsteps coming down the stairs.

“I have to admit, Max, I’ve never had one be so eager to come down here. Takes a bit of the fun out of it.”

Simon then walked over to Max, still lying face first on the concrete, and knelt down.

“I didn’t lie to you though, there is a monster down here... It just happens to be me.”

Simon then reached down to grab Max by the back of the neck, but as he touched Max’s skin, he noticed it was oddly cold...

Crrrrcckkk.

Suddenly the bones in Max's neck started to snap and twist as his head turned in a complete 180 degrees. His crooked smile was wider than ever, but it was now filled with jagged, shark-like teeth.

Max then lunged forward and bit down on Simon's hand, severing it completely. Simon's confident demeanor instantly turned to shock and horror as he fell backwards, clutching onto the bloody nub where his wrist used to be.

Max's head then snapped back around as he stood up from the concrete.

"Wow, my first one! It's not a mud mermaid or sewer clown, but you'll still do. Mom and Dad are going to be so pleased."

Simon pathetically inched himself into the corner of the room, whimpering and shaking in absolute terror as blood poured out of his arm like a faucet.

"W-w-what... Wh... *What are you?*"

Max picked up Simon's hand and devoured the flesh from the bone like a juicy chicken wing. "There's a lot of names for us, but that doesn't really matter right now."

Max snapped the pinky bone away from the hand and started using it as a toothpick.

"Gloomsbury has been my family's feeding ground for a long time. But we've come to like the townspeople, so we usually just feed on their dead. However, every so often other monsters will wander into our territory and start stirring things up, so we hunt them...and we *eat* them."

"But...but I'm not really a monster! I'm just a man!" Simon pleaded.

Max paused to lick the blood from his fingers like it was tangy barbecue sauce. "Well, I know one thing for sure...you're *very* tasty."



Max's jaw then began to widen and crack, revealing a second row of teeth behind the first. He then lunged forward as Simon's screams echoed through the cellar, and out through the large clearing in Gloombsbury woods.

...

Several weeks later, after police found what was left of Simon and his cellar, the town started to show signs of life again, and before long, everything was back to normal. People were walking to the store, going to the local diner, and kids were running around getting into mischief.

Max was there, of course, riding his little red bike through the streets, looking for monsters, cryptids, and creatures of the night. The convenience store owner was sitting outside his shop, sipping on a cup of coffee when Max came by, skidding to a halt.

"Hey, Mr. Williams! Have you seen any evil clowns around by chance?"

Mr. Williams chuckled. "Sorry, Max, I haven't."

"Dang, I really want to eat one." Max grumbled.

"What was that?"

"Oh...uh...I really want to *meet* one."

Mr. Williams just shook his head and smiled. "You're a strange kid, Max, strange kid."

THE GOLDEN RULE

In a world of strangers, it's best to be nice,
Because acting any different is a roll of the dice.
If you ignore these words and behave like a jerk,
You never know what type of person you'll irk.

It's a common fact, one that will give you chills,
But at some point in life, you'll meet someone who kills.
There's no way to tell who these monsters might be,
So be courteous to all, and you might avoid their spree.

Take our friend John, who had a horrible day,
On the way home from work, someone swerved in his way.
Now John knew better, especially a man of his age,
But anger took over and turned into rage.

John rolled down his window and shook his fist,
Then he threw an old can, and he didn't miss.
The driver slowed down, and glared at John's face,
Then he slowly smiled, like a creepy nutcase.

To make this brief, or a long story short,
There's no happy ending for one to report.
Like many tales considered horror or thriller,
Our friend had run into a serial killer.

John disappeared, and he was never found,
His bones were buried, somewhere deep in the ground.
What about the driver? A question you might ask?
He kept on driving, wearing John's face as a mask.

But there's no place for bullies, monsters, and goons,
As karma works quickly, no one is immune.
It isn't magic, the supernatural, or fate,
The more you do wrong, the more enemies you make.

The driver was caught, and his sentence was fair,
An electric current soon ran through his chair.
This story is dark, but it's also a fable,
So, listen closely, as long as you're able.

You may know this already, but no harm if repeated,
Treat others as you would like to be treated.
A simple statement, but a valuable tool,
And that's why they call it... the golden rule.



NIGHTMARE SOUP

III

MIDNIGHT SNACK



